

**TWO PLEASURES
FOR YOUR CHOOSING**

by the same author

THE ARRIVAL OF MASTER JINKS

CONNERY CHAPPELL

TWO PLEASURES
FOR YOUR CHOOSING

The World of William Crockford



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the tale of a man who was a legend in his own lifetime. So many of its incidents are myth, and not fact - and so are many of its characters.

In play there are two pleasures for your choosing
The one is winning, and the other losing.

BYRON, *Don Juan*

CHAPTER ONE

THE time was 1775 and the place was London. It was a damnable year, born with a curse on it; a year of genius and evil omen. It was brought in at gale strength as wrecks broke up against the Cornish rocks on New Year's Day. It went out in tragedy and bloodshed, howling away into history as the winter winds tore out the candlelights and numbed the watchmen in central London.

More than anything, it was a year for the broad brush stroke; a year of contrasts; of colour and filth, dignity and depravity; elegance and squalor. It was a year when new movements were taking birth, when men saw the truth fitfully between the clouds, and shivered as they glimpsed the future. It was a year, it seemed, when the world was spinning faster than usual on the lathe of evolution, and the cutting tool was biting. Mighty things were happening.

Inevitably, it was a world which mixed the grand and the gallant with the grotesque and the contemptible. At a time when whole continents were shaping their future destiny a printer was attacked by highwaymen at Enfield before the year was two days' old. In London, then unchallenged as centre of the universe, whole streets were noisy with the shouts of soothsayers and fortune tellers, thimble-riggers and cardsmen. The world gambled; London was the dicing counter of the world.

Before the year was more than a fortnight old six criminals had been executed at Tyburn, giving the town its traditional Monday morning show, while from the Old Bailey a rascal had been transported for life for daring to steal sixpence from a farmers' boy.

The freaks, of course, were not forgotten. The town drank its coffee one morning in January, read the prints, and noted

how an old fellow named Garden had just died at the age of 131. He had lived through the reigns of ten sovereigns; he had been a vigorous young fellow in the days of Cromwell, and had cut spears during the civil wars. The town read the anecdote, chuckled, and went about its business.

February came in with thunderstorms in the far west and with great tempests which sent enormous seas crunching hungrily against the crumbling coastline of Britain. A mad prophet raised his voice in the land and predicted that the whole island would be swallowed up by huge tidal waves, and the good people of the villages of Greenwich and Deptford took him so seriously that hundreds struggled in panic through the storm to the shelter and sanity of London. They arrived to find cutlasses flashing in the streets around Moorfields, where a mob was raiding the watchhouse and liberating a prisoner. They took little notice, for death was a common sight and life was cheap.

That was the sort of year it was, a wild year; a year heavy on the senses, of sweet scents and strong smells, dalliance and house flies; deep shadows and high colour. A year when blood flowed easily and when unpaved city streets squelched filth to the tread.

George the Third, of course, was on the throne, already showing signs of the mental weakness that was to end his reign in a Regency. He and the Queen spent the summer at Kew, they rose at six and called the first two hours of the day their own. Court started at eight, and the King lived sparingly, eating little but vegetables and drinking scarcely any wine. His heart was troubled, for he grappled with problems far beyond his understanding. Yet George, waiting for his despatches from across the Atlantic, had the knack of deceiving himself. He could not understand why the colonists should be so reluctant to pay for a bloody and victorious war that had been fought for their benefit, solely to rid them of the overlordship of the pestiferous Frenchman. An incident with tea chests in the harbour at Boston a year or two earlier had horrified him; the war, cracking its first shot on April 18 of that year of ill omen, left him numbed and be-

wildered. The revolt that was brewing in Ireland seemed comforting in comparison. There was always a revolt brewing in Ireland; at least one could understand it. This complicated war at long distance was something different.

Of course, there were compensations. A captain named Cook, who had been voyaging across the globe, had just returned with maps of new and exciting coastlines, which he was claiming for Britain. Warren Hastings, thank goodness, was installed as Governor General out in India; a difficult man, but an understanding one. In Canada the conquered and the colonists were being faithful. So there was much to be grateful for. There was also a thriving youngster, born in 1762, and later to become the Regent and in turn George IV, who was already looking lewdly at the serving wenches, and who would soon be helping himself to liberal portions of forbidden sweets.

That was the political scene. It could not have been more troubled. British interests and British arms, some of them by hire purchase, sniped and clashed across the globe, so that distant valleys were acrid with the stench of carbine, and distant earth was coagulating with the drip of blood.

In and around London significant things were happening, things which were to sew themselves into the tapestry of time. Things big; things small. Cricket was catching on; its rules had just been drawn up; Surrey and Kent were playing the early county matches. Betting men as far north as Doncaster were flirting with the idea of staging a three-year old race to determine the champion of champions. Highflyer had just been foaled, and was to add to Matchem, Herod and Eclipse a blood which was to make the English racehorse the greatest of them all.

But the horse, although champion, was not the only object to receive the honour of the Englishman's bet. The hawk had long since disappeared; guns were far from perfect, and the double barrel was being evolved in aid of the gentry only. Instead there were thousands of coursing dogs throughout the country, even though the law officially forbade them. Coursing was

ideal—it produced a hare for the poor man's belly, and a bet for everyone.

Yet even coursing was unimportant compared with cock-fighting, which was really the sport of the man in the street. From the Rainbow Tavern the distinguished Doctor Johnson himself, ruler of the literary men, had delivered his blessing. A fighting cock, he had said, had a nobleness of resolution, and certain it was that he condescended to attend a main from time to time.

Johnson, of course, was only one of the men of genius in this year of earthquake and sudden storm. There were many others. Back from his tour of North Wales with the Thrales, the ponderous Doctor could sit in his Rainbow, admired by all, earl of the epithet, monarch of the word. But even he had his equals; there was Sir Joshua Reynolds, dominating the world of art, and David Garrick, master of Drury Lane. The actor was getting old now and his hand was unsteady; he was thinking of retiring. His theatre was not all success, and he was feeling the strain. That year, for instance, he had tried a new actress, a Mrs. Siddons, as Portia, only to see the town drift away to the masks and the gaming tables, bored at such lack of promise.

Edward Gibbon, one of the Johnson clubmen, was travelling between London and Lausanne and finishing the first volume of his history of Rome: Adam Smith, almost an unknown, was completing his study of the wealth of nations, which he was to publish on the following year. Across the way from Garrick's theatre young Richard Brinsley Sheridan had just presented "The Rivals" at Covent Garden. The youth was only twenty-four and the town was indifferent, although later it changed its mind after the cast had been reshuffled.

Along in Westminster, another fledgling was attracting the public eye. Edmund Burke, now in his prime, had taken up his alliance with a promising youngster, Charles James Fox. The pair lifted their voices in debate, and opposed the war against the American colonists.

Out west beyond the town, lording it over his world as surely as Johnson lorded it in Fleet-street, sat Hugh Walpole, complaining of his gout, watching the pineapples in his glasshouses, writing his endless letters and paying his florid compliments. Back from Paris to his dogs and cat at Strawberry Hill, he damned it as a wicked year of forced gaiety, when the younger generation had nothing better to do than game, dream, dance and go to Newmarket. The French, he said sadly, had grown philosophers. The English danced.

A great regatta was planned on Thames-side in the height of summer, the first ever staged in England. Vast crowds flocked to the bridges, which were covered with gaming tables. The whole river from London Bridge to the 'Ship' at Millbank was dotted with pleasure vessels and a thousand flags flew from the lines of barges. Boats moved riskily amid stream, selling food and drink and diversion to the rolling revellers; cannons boomed, bands played, and the royal party moved upstream to a Temple of Neptune at Ranelagh, while the whole town cheered.

More than anything, the great regatta was the outward and visible sign of the craving for enjoyment that marked 1775.

But life was not all pleasure; far from it. Men of science were wrestling with the spheres, and strange ideas were abroad in the land. Learned gentlemen addressed the Royal Society on the possibility of stilling the waves by the simple process of pouring oil on the troubled waters, an experiment which they took with commendable seriousness. The extraordinary ability of garden snails to resist heat came in for long and learned dissertation, while the electric eel became sudden scientific news. The Venus fly-trap, aptly described as a sensitive plant, had just been discovered. In less scientific, but equally praiseworthy circles, a gentleman named Doctor Cook, of Leigh, in Essex, was announcing to the world the invention of a cosmetic which was also a preventative and remedy for various stubborn disorders, including the scald head and the itch. Against worms it was infallible.

So the people of England revelled and wrangled, wenched

and studied, worked and drank, snatching their relaxation where they could; colourful, roystering, argumentative; quick to affection, quick to temper, thinking little of the squalor around them. Those were days when all roads led to London; they were rough roads, although the turnpikes were more efficient than they had been, and stage coaches arriving at the Post Office in mid-winter often carried a corpse on the outer benches, frozen stiff on the journey. More than half a million people lived in London, in space and splendour, in indescribable muck; dandies in silk, bonnets in brocade, drunken beggars gibbering in their tatters. For the rich it was a world of extreme elegance and dignity, of high culture and good taste; for the poor it was a world of sudden violence and incest, a squint-eyed obscenity of a world, best understood by the likes of Wilkes and Hogarth. But the poor went on, trampled downwards; so that only the rarest genius could rise up from St. Giles or the stews around Temple Bar. The poor were in the majority, but they were a world apart. The gentry passed them by and saw them not. Only the Methodists had a care for them.

That was the London scene in 1775. The prisons were full, the road to Tyburn was lined with interested bystanders. The mob roystered; robbing, rioting, fighting, raping; its shouts chilled the night air of the empty and dangerous streets, and sent the linkmen hurrying to their homes; after dark the heart beat faster in the late sedan chair. It was a world where babies died at the breast, where the poor expected one lease of life, and the rich another.

As it came in, so it went out, this year of evil genius. A strange earthquake shook Paris, and distant quivers were felt in England. A great sou-wester piled up wrecks on the coasts of Ireland, and never did a year pass on with such a howl of gale, with such driving rain, shrieking through the puddled, unlit streets of London.

As the storm rose to its full fury a woman groaned and fretted in an attic over a bulk shop at Temple Bar. Her hair was caked

and her forehead bright with sweat; the candles blew gustily as the wind swept in and cleared away the odours and the darkness of the sick room. A crone from a nearby gin shop attended her as she heaved and squirmed and thrust; the night wore on and still she wrestled, pushing, swearing, groaning, and taking her tot of spirits.

In the dawn she lay back exhausted. A prowling pauper turned over the garbage in the gutter outside the shop below: he found a raw fish head and then disappeared in the grey half-light of the early morning. Down the hill at the Fleet sewer the rats were busy. A scream, sudden, dramatic and ignored, rose shrilly from Bridewell and made itself heard in the stillness of the world outside. A watchman, tired and white-faced, called the hour near St. Clements. Far to the east an early coach moved off to Ipswich; the taverns near the Post Office were already a-bustle as men prepared to set off to the far ends of the kingdom. The light mounted in the rain-washed sky; London woke up.

Up in the attic the woman moaned, swallowed another gulp of spirits, and fell into a deep and raucous slumber. Left to herself, the old crone drank from the bottle, lifted the infant, and fondled its buttocks with grimy hand. Leering, she tweaked its organ, looked into the future, and cackled as her mind was full of unmentionable things. Then she patted its belly, gave it half a teaspoonful of gin and water, and settled it down again.

The boy lived. They called him William Crockford.

CHAPTER TWO

IN faded letters over a butcher's shop in Covent Garden were the words: Jack Slack, Champion of England.

It was a long time now since the days when Slack had held his title, and the old fellow himself was dead. He had been a genial old soul, respected by all; a man who had kept his wits about him. He had borne his scars with honour. They had buried him decently back in the days when young William Crockford was a mere toddler, but his legend, as one of the great champions in the heyday of the noble art, lived on after him. He was remembered, although it was more than thirty years since that wonderful morning back in 1750 when he had hammered the mighty Broughton to his knees and so earned the bonnet with the champion's ribbons.

Now, looking back on it, the fight was nothing but a blurred memory in the fuddled brains of the ancients, indistinguishable from a dozen others.

But it had been a great fight and it had left a great name behind it, and to this day a member of the fancy, strolling through Covent Garden, or hastening by sedan chair to some tryst with a whore in the district, would glance approvingly at the name over the butcher's shop, and nod to the memory of the old warrior who, in fifteen amazing minutes, had battered the very father of the modern art into defeat. The fancy, coarse and greedy as it was, could still remember to salute a master. He was the last of the immortals.

Not quite the last, to be strictly truthful, for old Broughton himself, palsied and nearly blind, was still alive and haunting this very district. But Broughton was a name in defeat. He had been the most fashionable of all the gladiators, the friend of the very throne itself. His had been the simple mistake of losing.

And so the fancy had no time for Broughton, its members pausing, at best, to fling him a coin or two in the gutter.

Since the great days of Slack the noble art had declined. There were still fighters in plenty, and the patrons and the legs and the betting men had ample opportunity to indulge their sport. But the championship itself was in a muddled and unsatisfactory state, a rough and tumble for third-raters.

It was Tom Johnson who revived the art. He was a Yorkshireman whose real name was Jackling and he was born in the very year when Slack had humbled Broughton. It was almost as though the fates had taken some distillation from the toppled champion and endowed a distant baby with his magic. For nearly twenty years, while he grew to maturity, Johnson had worked as a corn porter in the wharves of Thames-street and his hands were hard from handling the sacks of grain. He had grown tough, lifting and heaving away as with the strength of two men, and it was said of him that he could take a load of corn and twirl it around over his head, as a lesser man might swing a rattle.

One of the first men to hear of his prowess was old Broughton himself, grubbing out a meal a day on a lot of hope and a little charity. Old and sick as he was the master could tell a fighter when he met one, and it was young Crockford who first brought the corn porter and the faded champion together.

Crockford, then, was a podgy boy of nearly nine, cunning and rapacious, a snivel-nosed product of the London stews. He divided his life between the world around the western end of the Strand and Billingsgate, where he bought fish for his mother's bulk shop at Temple Bar, his father having died during his infancy. Sometimes, even at rising nine, he would pause at one of the hazard shops of Fleet-street, study the rolling dice, and plunge a penny or two. Sometimes he won. More often he lost. Slowly he was learning. As he grew older he realised that there were two worlds in London, the world of colour and sparkle and wealth, and the world of the stews and the debtors' prisons. It was fish and hard work on one side; the rattle of dice and the

clang of money on the other. At night, when most of the boys in the neighbourhood would be content with the streets behind St. Clements, Crockford would be off to the north-west, to the stench of St. Giles and Seven Dials, or away westwards, to the glitter and laughter of Covent Garden, where the flashy women were kept and the chairmen were busy. Sometimes, even at nine, he would wander off to that even more elegant world out at St. James's, where the beaux led their exquisite lives in their clubs, gaming heavily. Sometimes, too, Crockford would explore south of Fleet-street, to the dirty alleyways that fell away muddily into the river on the north bank; there he would watch the gamblers from the gin shops, pallid as their money ebbed away with the tide. Those were the days when the whole world gambled, and London was the dicing counter of the world.

One day Crockford paused at the wharves of Thames-street and watched Tom Johnson as he carried two sacks instead of one. Crockford marvelled and thought of the champion he knew in Covent Garden. And that night he told old Broughton, not as though he was passing on great news, for he was a boy and could not think that far ahead, but boastfully, as though to tell him that there were still strong men in the world, who could have compared with the beggar in his championship days. Next morning Broughton trudged out to the wharves, found his man, and ran his fingers thoughtfully over the fellow's features and shoulders — for it was hard to say what manner of man you were dealing with when your eyes were clouded as with a veil. Back they went to Covent Garden and late that night Broughton stood by while the porter sparred with a local lout. It was soft stuff, done with gloves which had been acquired by Crockford, for the professors reserved the bare knuckles for the real thing, and Broughton, hungry as he was, was not risking a man's face in a trial. The old fighter listened to the bout, to the snort of laboured breathing, to the rhythm of the footwork, the beat of gloves. In the deepening twilight of his failing sight he could see little, but he sensed enough. Instruction started.

A few weeks later the cumbersome corn porter had the impudence to challenge Jarvis the Carman. It was not much of a match, a third-rater and an unknown, but it was a start. Johnson, from Thames-street, smashed his man to the grass in a matter of minutes.

The fight attracted little attention, for there was never much money for Jarvis, and there were not even ten score of the fancy present to notice that a boy of rising nine and a palsied old prizefighter stood side by side behind the new man's corner.

But Crockford watched the betting before the match. It was simple arithmetic, and he had a quick mind for figures. He was learning.

Before many months there followed an early morning sortie to Kensington Gardens. Word of the previous knock-out had gone round the taverns and the whore shops, so that this time there was a bigger turn-out. The high-booted fancy, huddled in thick coats, squared themselves against a racing east wind and watched the Croydon Drover, a second-rater of some experience, crumple before the new hope.

The fellow had promise, they decided; he was thirty-three, a sensible age for a fighter; not too young but able to take punishment; not too old. He was a round man, not more than five feet nine, and he weighed about fourteen stone. He was deep in the chest, where you needed it for stamina; tremendously heavy in the shoulders, where his felling strength was; thin in the shank, which suggested speed. Furthermore, he was unmarked.

It needed only such a new personality to bring the fancy back to the ring; when Johuson beat Steevy Oliver, who was known as the Death, there were literally thousands of spectators swarming around the ringside on Blackheath, and the coaches jammed the road back to London. Oliver was a veteran; he had fought, as a colt, back in the days of Broughton himself, but the old champion was not present to hear the battle. Broughton had found Johnson, perhaps; but Broughton was not size enough to enjoy the right to patronise him. What use was a beggar, and a practically blinded

one at that, to a keen young corn porter who was the talk of the fancy? No use at all. So Broughton disappeared from the scene, to return to the gutter and the stews of Seven Dials, to die sightless and starving within a few years.

Crockford, on the other hand, remained. The boy was soon ten years of age, and he looked as though he would mature early. He was at the ringside, a mascot in the new man's corner, when Bill Love, the Butcher, challenged the rising star for fifty guineas. The road to York was bright with colours as the sports rode out to Barnet, only to see Butcher smashed to the ground within a very short time.

Next came Jack Towers, who had previously beaten the Death, and who was thus considered to stand some sort of chance on form. It was a good betting match, but Towers was beaten from the start.

More than three years after he had first entered the ring, by which time Crockford was nearly thirteen, Johnson met a man named Fry at Kingston, battered him within half an hour, and drove off back to Covent Garden with no more than a swig of the bottle and with no blood in his nose. Here, said the fancy, wining and dining on the way back to London, was the future champion. The Bristol men had better watch their step. And when, next year, Bill Warr of Bristol bolted from the ring after ninety minutes, the corn porter from Thames-street was champion in reality and the prize ring was back where it was in the great days of Broughton and Slack; it was once more the noble art, attracting again those vital things which were part of it; hysteria and blood lust; hypocrisy and fraud; heroism and avarice; high adventure and cowardice; it became once more the tilting ground of brave men and braggarts, rogues, vagabonds and princes.

An adolescent Crockford watched Warr lurch from the ring to acknowledge that he had no stomach for the battle. As he saw the sovereigns change hands and listened to the shout of the frenzied fancy, shrill with excitement at the latest victory, the lad thought back to Covent Garden, to the corner near old Slack's

butcher's shop, where Broughton would stand, begging alms against the weather. Dimly, as a boy will, Crockford saw through the scene. The fighters, he realised, never won. It was only the fancy who kept on winning. And the boy would watch the sportsmen, so red faced and so well clothed, such heavy men at the table, so quick to the bottle, so valiant and determined with cornered chambermaid: brave men, they were, strong against the blows others exchanged in the prize ring.

Broughton, naturally and properly, was forgotten. He was old, a failure, and finished with. Johnson was the new champion and the new star. And so the friendship between the ugly lad and the fashionable prizefighter developed steadily. The boy worked for the man. And the boy was happy.

Crockford grew into an odd lad; big for his years, pale-faced and very podgy. He was no beauty. His nose was getting large and puberty was threatening his tongue, so that he spoke with two voices, neither attractive. He was old for his years and he had already learned about life the hard way. Even now he was busy serving an apprenticeship to manhood, wenching in darkened doorways. Month by month, as fight succeeded fight and the name of Johnson rose until he was accepted as one of the outstanding men in the history of the ring, the lad developed quickly.

The boy learned painfully to be industrious and quick of wit. He had a brain that worked at speed and he had picked up the secret of quick figuring in the Billingsgate fish market. There, too, he had learned to use a bit of simple lettering, for he had had next to no schooling in the ordinary sense; his father having died soon after he was born, he had been left to help his mother in the family fish shop at Temple Bar. Since the time he was ten young Crockford had done the buying. He bought well; whenever it was possible he bought sharply. He was trained in a hard school, and if he could gain by cheating it was perfectly reasonable that he should do so.

As he grew older he scoffed at all ideas of learning. But he taught himself more about fish than most of the others would

ever know. As a small boy he had wandered unnoticed through the market; he had climbed around and over the boats at the wharves. He picked up information. He knew where the boats came from; where the shoals were, and what catches came at what time of the year. He learned to keep his eyes open and his ears ready; he learned to be inconspicuous, to pass as another urchin in the scurry of the market. He learned who would give him a penny or two in exchange for useful news. He would find out the prices people were paying, and would pass the information to the next man. His own price, as like as not, would be a discount on his own small order.

So Crockford grew to early manhood, much of his life divided between the bulk shop at Temple Bar and the stenching fish market, its stalls jumbled downhill to the riverside. Periodically life brightened, as when he strolled westwards, when he loitered in the hazard shops along Fleet-street, or when he joined up with Johnson's camp and went off to a fight. The fish shop itself interested him but little, and already he was spending more time in the evenings prowling the streets. He came to know every alleyway of the stews of St. Giles, and every club door and gaming place in St. James's. He was happy standing outside the clubs and watching the beaux. He was ever ready to open a door, run for a sedan, carry an errand, or tip his forelock to a passing swell. A semi-literate fledgling from St. Clements, he was growing up to join the great anonymity of the London poor; his life, it was to be expected, would contain many kicks and few pence; little colour and less peace; no security and only the slenderest existence; a life that would always be one jump ahead of the watchmen. But there was one difference between young Crockford and any other youngster at his elbow; he was born with ambition, a quick wit, and a mind that formed question marks. He was always asking, and sometimes his questions were high impertinence for one of such humble status. He knew what he wanted and he frequently got it, in a bargain in the fish market, in a tip from a sauntering gentleman, in a modest coup at the hazard table, in

acquiescence from some robust serving wench, squirming and giggling in some darkened doorway. By his methods, as he told himself lewdly after one such encounter, you often had your ears boxed. But you more often received the favours.

His friendship with the great Tom Johnson ripened steadily with the years. The champion, inevitably, was surrounded by that strange assortment of gentlemen, adventurers, thieves and gamblers who have only their enthusiasm for another man's fight in common. Tom was a hero in Covent Garden, where the fancy met and drank and whored and had its being. Wherever he was, Crockford was there behind his corner, as it were, not regarding himself as an equal, but ready and willing to render some service to the great man — in return for the privilege of his patronage.

The first great climax in the life of Tom Johnson occurred in October 1789, when Crockford was rising fourteen and when the entire sporting world was talking of nothing but the battle between the champion and Isaac Perrins, of Birmingham. Perrins was one of the strongest men in Britain. He was forty, he had been fighting for many years, he was round, and immensely deep in the chest. Once he had lifted nearly half a ton of iron and moved it into a wagon. Few men had stood against him for as long as five minutes, and the small fry of the Midlands had been pummelled almost contemptuously from his ring. He was over six feet, and weighed seventeen stone, which was three more than Johnson who was also much shorter.

And when Perrins at last challenged the world for five hundred guineas the fancy knew instinctively that the challenge was aimed at one man, and one man only. Despite the fact that he was champion, the weight of money from Birmingham was so heavy that Johnson started with the odds at two to one against him. Crockford, pressed in the crowd of allies behind the Johnson corner, had ten whole sovereigns on his man, which represented a month's expenditure in Billingsgate, a loan, the profits of his occasional hazard ventures, and his savings. In all the welter of

streets behind St. Clements, in which he had grown up, there was not a boy who had ever seen such money, or who could even dream that he would ever grow to see it. Yet here was he, Crockford, not only possessing such a fortune, but wagering it like a full man on the outcome of a prize fight. Life was indeed good.

The battle took place at one in the afternoon, in a grass ring pitched just outside Banbury in Oxfordshire. The fancy had poured down from London to the fight, a colourful collection of gentry and blackguards. And never before, in the whole history of the ring, was such a battle witnessed. Its like would surely never be seen again. For five minutes the pugilists circled craftily and not a blow of consequence was struck. Suddenly Perrins aimed hugely at his man, missed, and was swept off his feet by a counter blow from the agile Johnson. Thus ended the first round, and thus ended the next three, with the champion on his feet, all science to his fingertips. But Perrins fought back, and for round after round felled his man by sheer brute force. The minutes and the rounds wore on, until the grass was a greasy slither, bespattered by blood and sweat, with both fighters toe to toe, exchanging slackening blows. Both fought with one eye closed, until Johnson, with desperate determination, slit the nose of his opponent and turned the odds to ten to one in his own favour. Forty rounds were fought; then forty five. Fifty. Johnson, exhausted, fell without a blow, losing his balance, and Birmingham claimed the fight. But the umpire called it fair and the men battled on, Perrins scarcely recognisable as a human being, his face pulped, his courage bottomless. So it continued until, after sixty-two rounds, the Birmingham men kept Perrins in his corner, much against his inclination, and so conceded the contest. Hats were thrown in the ring, and the still afternoon air was hot with excitement; prizes and gifts were showered on the fighters, one wealthy patron making the champion a present of one thousand sovereigns. There were handshakes, there were speeches, and here and there, in the gush of greed and jealousy, a boy by

instinct detected the gold of chivalry that made a paradox of the prize ring.

In all the excitement young Crockford stood calm and unmotional. He looked on. He noticed things. In his pocket he had had ten sovereigns. Now he had thirty, for he had collected his winnings. His own face was unmarked and his breathing was slow and even. He had not earned the money the hard way. Thoughtful, he went back to London, attendant on the victorious champion. The squelch of fist on bone was over; men who had not fought had become rich.

It was obvious to Crockford, as it could have been obvious to anyone not deliberately blind with prejudice, that Tom Johnson was never the same man afterwards. In one mighty afternoon he had aged a generation. His timing had gone. His temples had been battered. He now tired easily. He lurched at times as he walked. It was as though his sight were uncertain.

So when, just under two years later, the champion was matched with Ben Brain, who was known as Big Ben, Crockford did something for which most lads would have despised him, but which marked him out as a young man with a mind of his own. He thought it over coldly and deliberately, and put every penny he could scrape together against his own man. He backed Big Ben for fifty sovereigns.

It was a great deal of money, a fortune for a boy from Temple Bar. But Crockford was thrustful with ambition, and anxious to make the best use of the hoard of coppers and silver which he kept in his mattress. Sometimes, in flickering candlelight, he would undo the bag and pull out the straw. Then he would take out and count his cash, every penny of which had been made by using his head, by thinking just a split second quicker than the next man in the bargain or the hazard plunge. He was now nearly sixteen; he was ambitious; he was ugly; he was the richest boy in all Temple Bar. He was proud of his secret and he liked to tell himself that he deserved his success; he had used his brains. They were the only things a man could really bank on; they

were better than fists, for they lasted longer. Brains meant riches; brains meant success; brains meant sedan chairs and brocade, and not fish shops in Temple Bar; brains meant wenches in beds and not in doorways. Crockford had brains. He was not so much conceited as self-confident. He would lay awake at night, smelling the stench from the fish shop down below. His mother stank of fish. His clothes, as he knew, reeked of them. His hands were fishy. His hair was fishy. There were even fish scales mildewing some of the pennies in the mattress.

As he grew older he hated fish.

Meanwhile, he had ambition. and it was men like Tom Johnson who helped him realise it.

Johnson's fight with Big Ben was staged at Wrotham, in Kent, in January, 1791, and it seemed as though all the nobility of England had assembled for the occasion. But they were not to see another classic like the earlier fight with Perrins. Far from it. It was obvious at once that Johnson was not the man he had been. He fell heavily in the first round and broke his nose, and he never recovered from the shock of that opening punch. Once, with a tremendous effort, he stretched Ben on the grass, but the man came back, fighting strongly, and soon Johnson sealed his own verdict by breaking the middle finger of his right hand. From now on defeat was inevitable and in his despair Johnson lost his science and held on desperately to his opponent. Two blows, after twenty weary minutes, finished the fight, the first to the ribs, the second to the mouth, so heavy that Johnson's lip was nearly cut in half.

That was the end of Johnson. The crowd was unusually subdued, for it was left with the frustrated feeling of having seen a champion fret and fritter his way to defeat, rather than go out in a mighty blaze of glory. Johnson never fought again. He took the 'Grapes', in Lincoln's Inn Fields, but innkeeping was too tempting for his fleshy nature, and between gambling and drink he was soon in serious poverty. He survived only six years, being merely forty-seven when he died in 1797. Remarkably enough,

Big Ben died the earlier. Although he had not appeared to have been seriously hurt in his fight with Johnson, it is a fact that his health was always ailing afterwards. He, too, never fought again, although a match was made for him to defend his title against Bill Wood, the Coachman, in 1794. Shortly before the contest was due Big Ben took to his bed, and died at the age of 41.

All sporting London turned out to his funeral. He was buried in the churchyard of St. Sepulchre's, and Tom Johnson, who was to follow him to the grave so soon, was among the mourners. Crowds of the fancy and the curious mingled with the funeral party, and the clubs agreed that no champion ever had a more respectable burial.

The boy Crockford was not at the funeral. He was now grown up. He was too busy.

CHAPTER THREE

WITH the defeat of Johnson by Big Ben Brain a Bristol man became Champion of England, and so claimed a crown which had been staked for good Bristol men many years earlier, when Cornelius Harris, a local collier, had challenged the great Jack Slack, but had fallen in the attack. Now, although Brain held to his laurels only for want of challengers, the fancy could yet feel that these were great days for the sports of the West Country. Bill Warr and Bully Hooper were Bristol heroes along with Brain. Hooper, with his madcap dissipations, was almost a living legend, and the lads of the West were in awe of him. Protégé of the eccentric and riotous Lord Barrymore, he was known to be on nodding terms with the very Prince himself, was known to have horsewhipped an aristocrat who had dared to insult his patron, was known to have taken his part in some of the wildest orgies in London society. Yes, the young bloods of Bristol heard fantastic stories of the triumphs of this youth who had tramped to London along the Bath Road, and who had started off as a tinman in Tottenham Court Road, gay with its hawthorn hedges. Well can it be understood that the tales of his flashing exploits in ring and bedroom made him a hero in those hungry, restless days as the century drew towards its close.

For while it was true that London gambled and danced, as Walpole said, and while the capital had plenty of room for a lad with some brains and the right amount of brawn, while there was always a greeting for a gambler or an elegant bow for a beau, England itself was embarked on its last long struggle with the French. And, as usual with England, the issue started in disaster, as the Duke of York was driven from the Continent leaving thousands of men, English and mercenaries, behind him. The morale of the Army was low and the press gangs were never

busier with naval recruitment. Never, it seemed, were conditions in the Navy worse, and never had Englishmen had less desire for the sea; it was not that they feared the ocean; it simply meant that they hated the Navy.

But few people in London, sweltering in the heat of summer or shivering in the frozen slops of winter, were aware of these things. World events were the tittle-tattle of the clubs; they seemed to have only an indirect effect on the man in the street, providing always that he could escape the press gangs and get enough to eat.

In all this, in a London of easy money and direst poverty, in a London of casual laughter and most horrible squalor, a London that had the grace and elegance of St. James's at one extreme and the prison fever of Bridewell and Newgate at the other, young William Crockford grew to manhood. He came to know the town intimately; to know where the cock mains were; where you could see a bear fight; where there were women pugilists; where the prizefighters, the legs and the betting men forgathered: he came to know the dicing parlours and the gaming hells, except the fashionable ones, which were denied him. He watched money being won and lost, but usually, it seemed, being lost. He became indifferent as he saw a fool part with a week's wages as the dice came down the wrong way round; he shrugged unmoved at news of suicides, brought about by the gambling fever; he watched fingers tremble as clerks bought small parts of tickets in the lotteries; experience soon taught him that even the tickets themselves were often enough forgeries. He learned that a man will save for years, and that suddenly a madness would seize him and he would dissipate his whole future in a few wild hours of dicing. He watched fortunes change hands at the cockpits; he learned to figure the odds at hazard, to calculate at speed at cribbage, where a quick scorer could often peg a false point or two. He learned to frequent the racing taverns, particularly the 'Tun' in Jermyn-street, where the news came back to London down the road from Newmarket, and where many of the big commissions

were placed for the owners. He learned, more than anything else, that there is no fool like a losing fool — except the fool who has pity on him. Pity was a word quite outside Crockford's vocabulary.

Early of a morning, most days of the week, he would make his way down Fleet-street, over the stinking Fleet Ditch where in hot weather the thick excrement fouled the air as the tide receded. Then he would climb up through the City and so to Billingsgate. There he bought fish, arguing, jabbering, swearing, and cheating if it was convenient. Sometimes, coming back laden, he would pause at a Fleet-street coffee shop to strike a wager on some coming cock main, or back his fancy in some fight the town was getting excited about; of an afternoon, for he had no stomach for service in the shop, leaving the business of looking after the customers to his mother, he would wander afield and sometimes stay away for days on end. He had been out beyond the villages of Paddington and Bayswater, beyond Acton and even Brentford. The fancy were a vagabond lot; they did not like standing still for long, and the fashionable prize-fighters of the day pitched their quarters at various villages around the city. In this way Crockford came to know St. Mary le Bone, which had a little air of its own, but which was slowly being swallowed up in the litter of London; he knew Hampstead and Kilburn. There was shooting to be had around Kentish Town, and although he lacked the social position that went with a gun, he was aware of the value of shooting as a medium for gaming. Closer to home, Crockford knew the stews of St. Giles, and could roam without fear through the filth of what had once been called Whetstone Park, the criminal district near High Holborn. But murderers, footpads, snatch thieves, and the like, had no time for a podgy, pale-faced lad who reeked of fish. They wanted better game. He was safe in the stews. He looked as though he belonged to them.

Away up at Islington were various spas, including Sadlers Wells, where people took the waters — and where cardsmen and thimble-riggers did a brisk trade on holidays. Crockford was

quick with the thimbles, and better than most when it came to throwing the hazard dice; sometimes he earned money, working for the 'house'. And so it went on — visits to thinly populated Clerkenwell, with its tea gardens and its mulberry trees, its mineral spas and its elegant apartment houses, genteelly furnished for the benefit of merchants who found the rigours of the city air too much for them.

And so, running an errand for a prizefighter here, fawning on a monied member of the fancy there, he found himself making a shilling in one place, a sovereign sometimes in another. He was luckier than the rest of the crew of urchins with whom he had been weaned in the streets; he had the fish shop and Billingsgate to fall back on, if the hazard table was unkind. Remarkably enough, playing carefully, and watching the dice for as much as an hour before he risked his coin, he succeeded in showing a profit on his gaming.

By 1793 he was rising 18; large, pudding-faced, ugly; his skin would have been white if it had not been dirty, and his teeth were already decaying. His breath was foul. His feet were dirty; there was no reason why they should not be. He had ham hands, which were usually unwashed; his nails were torn and grubby. He dressed sloppily and his clothes were stained, although he would have liked to have spent his money on a fancy coat. But a sense of his position told him that he was not yet ready to start asserting himself above his station. His shoes would be down at heel, his stockings wrinkled; his breeches patched; his coat shapeless with its pockets sagging. And he smelt of fish.

Around him, London was seething with tremendous things, and in Newgate brave men were getting gangrene from their fetters. It was the price they were paying for writing the truth. The first threat and thunder of reform was in the air, but Crockford knew nothing about it. Lord George Gordon died in prison; Louis the Sixteenth was beheaded in distant Paris; a man named Ramsay produced a method of driving a boat through the water against the tide, using a steam engine and a pump, but people

rightly shrugged their shoulders at such lunatic ideas; another man named Martin Lucas, a wine merchant in Northampton, won £ 30,000 in the lottery; tinmen were rioting in Falmouth; the French introduced a new calendar, but the French were always doing dangerous and insane things, anyway; Marie Antoinette was executed; John Hunter the great surgeon teacher, dropped dead in a London hospital; inside England there seemed to be more brutal murders than ever before, and the great crowds who flocked to enjoy the public executions were never larger. It was a time when, with the guillotine busy in France, a curse seemed to go out from Paris and spread like a plague throughout the world, so that it became a year of violence and sudden death, pestilence, fire, earthquake and famine. Indeed, as before in the year 1775, the times were out of joint.

In the midst of all this, and unmindful of anything but the passing scene around him, Crockford found a notebook in the Tun Tavern. He picked it up from behind a bench, where it had fallen from a pocket.

He studied it that night. It was the opportunity he had been waiting for, the chance to extend his activities from the lower rungs of the fancy to the richer game.

Next evening he presented himself at White's Club and asked to see Colonel the Right Honourable Charles Edward Sebastian Foster.

White's was at that time, as, indeed, it had been for many years, one of the leading gaming clubs of St. James's. Its members were thought to be the finest in the land, just as they always had been. But card sharpers and professional gamblers could belong to it, providing only that they could raise the money and get somebody to propose them. There had always been thieves in White's along with the gentry. For more than half a century now reformers and preaching men had cried out against the place and its infamies, but the world shrugged its shoulders, most of the rabble, indeed, admiring the play that went on inside it. Wild

stories leaked out of its betting book, of how one gentleman would wager with another over the most intimate possibility of unchurched union, of future pregnancy. At White's they would gamble on life itself, the stakes from some ancient wager being collected by the last survivor.

In the midst of all the gaming the dinner was never overlooked for long, for the members were solid trenchermen, as became them in their position as leaders of English society. A dinner was ready every day during the sitting of Parliament; it was a tradition of the place, and its price of half a guinea — which was devilish high, as the town was quick to note — included malt liquors, oranges and olives. There was a hot supper, too, for eight shillings, and a cold table, complete with oysters, for a mere four. When the House rose the coaches rattled across from Westminster and the gaming rooms were packed; some members played whist, some backgammon, some even draughts and chess. But the big games, the ones which sent men like Charles James Fox to the moneylenders, were hazard and faro. By 1793 perhaps, the pace was slackening a little, for strange and disturbing things were occurring in the outside world. The play was not as high as it was to be later, when the youth who started as a fishmonger was to skin half the aristocracy of England. But it was still high enough; while the world gambled London was happy to be regarded as the dicing counter of the world.

Yes, those were brave days, and White's was proud of its position in the centre of things. Its members were men of the world; men of property; men who enjoyed the right sort of patronage; men elegant in dress, fastidious in taste, quick to temper, ready ever for laughter, for a bet, for a woman.

Of such a breed was the elegant Foster. When he first encountered Crockford he was forty, and on the standard of the day an exquisite. It is true that he was not quite as dashing as he had been ten years earlier, for fashion was changing. The days of the blades and beaux and the macaronis were over; the country, although it did not know it, was entering a period of comparative

drabness. A puritan streak was about to make one of its periodic assertions in public life. As revolution bled France and war bled Britain, as costs rose and hunger rose with them, the new seriousness of the times became reflected in the dress of the clubmen. Already one or two members of White's were starting to wear their hair unpowdered, thus anticipating Pitt's poll tax, that was to come a few years later. Foster would not go as far as that; but he joined with the other men of fashion in their revolt against the excessive ornateness of the preceding years. At Eton, although nobody paid much attention to him, was a youngster named Brummell, three years younger than Crockford; he was later to become leader of the new style in men's dress, the style of elegance and well-tailored simplicity. But Brummell, like Crockford, belonged to the future.

At the hazard table Foster was a good loser. He could afford it. At the supper table he was an enthusiastic eating man; he enjoyed it. Life had treated him kindly, giving him a handsome expectation from his father, and the digestion of a horse.

Outside his club, Foster was chiefly interested in horses. He bred them at his stables near Newmarket. His town horses were admired even in White's. He had more than thirty hunters. His racing string was one of the best in England. All this cost money, and a great deal of it, but Foster was well endowed. Not only was he reasonably near his full title, for his father was nearly ninety, but he held a number of useful sinecures in his own right. He was a royal verderer in a forest he had never seen, at an income of over a hundred pounds a year. He had some theoretical responsibility for some of the swans on the Thames, at another hundred. He was a clerk to a body whose meetings he never attended, at yet another hundred; a sheriff of a court whose name he recognised only when he received his bank books. Over and above all this he was paymaster to a regiment whose uniform would have puzzled him, architect to a branch of the Navy whose duties seemed non-existent, and was personally responsible for certain royal monies when the Court was in Exeter —

a part of the kingdom it had not visited for many years. So with one sinecure and another Foster did very well; it was a pleasant world, and a brave one; a world in which vice and squalor were locked out, as a man puts up shutters against the wind. In St. Giles the poor died of gin and fever. In St. James's Foster and his cronies greeted every new situation with an entry in the betting book.

That, then, was Foster. His life, from the days when he had left Eton, had been divided fairly evenly between the saddle, the table, the betting rooms, and a variety of bedrooms. His present was affluent and leisurely; as he advanced into middle age he continued doing the things he had done for years, enjoying them perhaps a little more. His future was assured.

It was possible for a man to rise from the stews of St. Giles and share Foster's club, just as it was possible for him to rise and share his women. Possible, but difficult. It needed the luck of a man who could hold his own against loaded dice. But in his sinecures, his elegance, his arrogance, in his command of respect from the less highly bred, in his possession of endless credit from his tradesmen and tireless civility from his bankers — in these things Foster and his class stood out alone. Nobody, however successful, could rise from St. Giles or Temple Bar and be accepted as what Foster was — a gentleman. The world might gamble, and dicing might bring rogue and prince to the same table. But the world was a snob. A gambler remained a gambler. Foster was Foster.

When Crockford presented himself to the porter at White's and asked to see Foster he was, of course, betraying his ignorance of the rules. The likes of Crockford did not present themselves at a gentleman's club. So when a waiter informed the Colonel that there was a young man who wished to supply him with some information, the reply was short and to the point; 'Throw him out.'

Foster returned his attention to the hazard game. Around him sat his fellow gamblers, some of them wearing the fancy bonnets, with festooned ribbons, which were supposed to bring luck.

Others liked to wear masks, the more easily to hide their feelings it was said. The club was only half full; the game was young; the bank was winning, and it was a hot night with the candles smelling from the walls. A night when it was almost too thundery for gambling. Foster toyed for a second with the thought of a sedan and a journey across to Covent Garden, where he kept a wench on the Piazza. Then he called the main, shook the dice and won. The other players chortled; the bank had been having it all its own way.

Suddenly Foster passed the dice, and beckoned a waiter.

'Go after that fellow, and tell him to stop this lad who has called to see me. Say I won't be long. He can wait. I probably won't be more than a couple of hours.'

It was after dawn before he decided to call it a night. He left the table a winner by fifty guineas. Small change, it was true, but he had been devilish lucky. The bank had been winning all night; Remingworth was down nearly a thousand, Rilling was losing twice as much. Sussex, who had been losing for months and couldn't afford it, was down a few hundreds, and it was the same story with the others. Foster took snuff, called for his coat and his horses, sauntered out into St. James's and nodded to a late sedan man, waiting on for the clubs to close in the hope of custom. From down by the Palace came the shout of a guard. A light summer wind stirred the early morning air, making London smell sweet and clean. From away along Piccadilly, at the dairy farm, came the sound of the cows. A coach rattled past the top on St. James's, outward bound down through Knights-bridge, making off on the first stage of its journey to the west country.

The day was young and fresh and full of promise. Foster decided to call in at Covent Garden after all.

He looked coolly at the lad who came up, hand on forelock. 'Well?'

Crockford produced a notebook. 'I just wanted to show you this, Sir.'

Foster examined the book, first with an air of indifference, then with close attention.

'My jockey's betting book,' he said quietly. 'How extremely interesting.'

Crockford plunged at his opportunity. It was June, it was nearly four in the morning, and he was tired. He had been waiting since before midnight, not daring to leave his post in case he missed his man. 'He's riding your horse at Newmarket on Saturday, you'll notice Sir. But he spent yesterday evening betting against it.'

Foster nodded, as he studied the entries. 'So I see.' He looked up sharply. 'Where did you get this book?'

Crockford explained eagerly. 'He dropped it just as he was leaving the Tun Tavern in Jermyn-street, Sir. He always goes there when he's in London. I picked it up — and I did some quick figuring. I reckoned that I could bring it to you and show you what was going on — and then return it to him to-night. You'll be glad of the information, Sir — and he'll be glad to get his book back.'

Foster grinned. He had a sense of humour. 'And you'll be the gainer both ways, eh?'

'Exactly, Sir.' Crockford nodded. 'He won't even think I'll be able to understand it.'

'You'll probably get a useful tip for bringing it back.' Foster returned the book to Crockford. 'You're no fool, boy. Most of you fellows can't even read. What's your name?'

'Crockford, Sir. William Crockford.'

'Where do you come from?'

'Temple Bar, Sir. My mother and I — we keep a fish shop.'

'You don't have to tell me that. You stink of fish.'

Foster tightened his coat and stepped into his town coach. The idea of a furtive sedan chair to Covent Garden was now out of the question. The betting book had shown him how plainly he had urgent business in Newmarket, where there were matters to be put right, if necessary at the end of the whip.

'I could make use of a lad like you,' the Colonel said, as though from a sudden thought. 'Come and see me next week.'

'Here, Sir?'

'Of course not. I don't want you at my club, any more than I want you at my home. You know the Piazza at Covent Garden? Just walk along it on the Strand side and you'll see a house with green shutters. Ask for — just ask for the lady of the house. You'll be expected.' He fumbled in a pocket and threw a couple of sovereigns out on to the street. 'Take that for your pains.'

The coach moved quickly up St. James's to take Colonel the Right Honourable Charles Edward Sebastian Foster to his estate at Bayswater.

Crockford fussed in the gutter. He had found one sovereign, but the other had unaccountably rolled and rolled, finally losing itself in the unswept muck in the middle of the road. Crockford, tired, bent and combed the horse dung with his fingers. A sovereign was a sovereign. As he hunted he grew bad tempered, and in his temper he vowed that one day he, Crockford, would be in the carriage, tossing sovereigns to the likes of Colonel Foster. It was an impious, an almost blasphemous thought. Had he talked as he was thinking any sensible magistrate would have clapped him in the stocks and ordered him a flogging.

But Crockford was wise. He was learning rapidly. He knew the importance of keeping his mouth shut.

George Raymond was a jockey, and no more dishonest than the rest of the fraternity in his day. He lived near Newmarket and spent much of his life posting on the roads to London and the north, following the meets round the calendar. When in London, in common with most of his kind, he could be found at any of the sporting taverns where the fancy gathered to strike their bets.

At this particular time the fashion was for the 'Tun' in Jermyn-street, and Raymond, on his frequent visits to London, would as like as not be found there, usually at his favourite seat at the

same table, for in those days, when a man had all night to drink in, he inclined to take his time over it. Certainly, Raymond would visit other inns; he might look in at the 'Starboard' in Haymarket, at the 'Colt' in Wild Lane; he might go down to the 'Oxenham' in Orange-street. These would be short visits, to keep some private assignation; to meet someone secretly. Soon he would be back at the 'Tun', which would be his headquarters.

Short, wizened, bow-legged and crafty, Raymond had as much intelligence as most. He was grimy, and he cringed in the presence of swells. He had started as a stable boy and from his earliest days he had felt the welt of leather. He had been beaten for losing; he had been beaten for winning; he had been flogged for going ahead, flogged for holding back; kicked for coming from behind, kicked for not coming from behind. He had been taught to obey orders the painful way. But an order on the Heath before the start was one thing; what happened in the race itself was another. Once the field was away the watching owner could do nothing but clutch his whip and hope. So Raymond had learned that there were times when a whipping could be painful but highly profitable. Certainly he had not done badly for himself.

A week or two after Crockford had so impudently called at White's Club to see the Right Honourable Charles Edward Sebastian Foster, George Raymond entered the Tun Tavern rather earlier than usual. He was hot, he was dusty, and the sweat was soaking his breeches for he had ridden in from the Newmarket meeting at breakneck speed.

The fancy were still down on the Heath, roystering in the Newmarket gaming clubs, or on their way back by road. The people who mattered were this far from London. The 'Tun' itself was nearly empty; only an impoverished leg or two, unable to beg a lift or pay for a stage coach ticket to Newmarket, was in the place. Raymond dined and wined and waited. He did not wait long. At ten, by which time few of the fancy would be nearer than Epping, Crockford joined him.

The lad was now nearly nineteen, heavy and as ugly as they

make them. His teeth were bad and a front one was missing; the gap showed hugely when he grinned. His hands were large and dirty and he walked with a suggestion of a limp. His voice was hoarse and throaty and his eyes crafty. Indeed he was no beauty.

For some time they fenced. Then Raymond said:

'Did you show my betting book to Foster before you sold it back to me last week?'

Crockford looked at him steadily.

'Yes.'

'I thought so.' Unknowingly Raymond put his hand to his ear, where the scab was still fresh from the whiplash. 'I thought so.' He lifted his glass and his knuckles were white. For a second it was as though he would smash glass and Madeira into the lad's face. It would have been easy and the scars would have reminded the fancy that this man was dangerous; he made bad bargains.

'I ought to smash your face in.'

Crockford grinned. But there was no humour in it. 'You would'nt have the guts.'

'You ought to talk about guts,' replied Raymond. 'You smell of them enough.'

A few seconds later he picked himself up from the floor. The slops dripped from the fallen table; a glass rolled in the sawdust. One leg of his chair had broken under him as he fell. The wine in his eyes stung as he wiped the muck from his face.

'I don't like talk about guts, Raymond, see,' Crockford said quietly.

'All right. All right.' The jockey rubbed the dirt from the front of his coat.

'Now have a drink and tell me what you want to talk about.' Crockford was coolly in command. It was the difference between fourteen stone and seven.

'I've been doing a bit of figuring,' Raymond was speaking slowly, gathering his wits about him; but there was hate in his

face. 'Foster knew I wasn't winning. The bets showed it. Well, I reckoned that he could only have learned by seeing my book, and the only man who could know what was in it was you.'

'Quite right.'

'So I reckoned that you showed it to him and then sold it back to me.'

'Of course.'

It was some moments before the jockey spoke. 'How much did he give you?'

'Two sovereigns.'

'The same as I gave you for bringing the book back. Never mind.' The jockey hesitated again. Then he looked at Crockford and smiled bitterly. 'You foxed me, Crockford. I'd been planning to fix that race for weeks. I needed the money.'

'What do you expect me to do? Cry?'

'No. But I'm expecting you to do something for me.'

'Why should I?'

'Because you'll be paid for it.'

'That's different.' Crockford watched his man swig the Madeira. Himself drank carefully and then usually with meals. The later the hour the clearer his head.

Raymond looked round the room before he spoke.

'I was due to ride Hindu for Foster at Doncaster this September,' he said quietly. 'And it's important that he knows how heavily I'm backing it.'

'Well, why don't you tell him?'

'After what happened last week? He'll never believe a word about me—unless he finds it out by accident.'

'That's true enough.'

'Hindu's a good horse. And now Foster says I'll never ride for him again. He's like all his sort. They think what I did is clever if they do it—but they won't stand for it from their servants. Now if you go along to him you could say that you saw my book when I was drunk one night and that I'm already wagering on Hindu.'

'What good will that do you?'

'Don't you see? As soon as he knows that I'm backing the horse he'll be anxious to let me ride it. Many a good horse has been beaten through having the wrong jockey.'

Crockford thought for some time. 'Yes, I can do that all right. He'll listen to me. If you want him to know what's going on you couldn't pick a better way of telling him. What do I get out of it?'

The hesitation was marked. 'I'll give you five sovereigns.'

'A mount like Hindu ought to be worth more than that.'

Raymond shrugged his shoulders; 'All right. I want the mount. I'll give you ten if I get the ride. It's up to you.'

The evening was warm. The first coach was in from Newmarket and the fancy, loud and clamorous as ever, was jostling for wine and ale. Crockford smiled at his man. 'For a mount like Hindu at Doncaster any jockey would be glad to give fifty.'

'Fifty it is,' Raymond said eventually, 'providing that I get the mount.'

'You get it. Otherwise you don't pay me a penny.' Crockford leaned forward. 'Aren't you very sure of yourself? What about that horse Timothy, trained by Smelt down in Epsom? I did hear say it was hacking all the way to Doncaster for the meeting. They would'nt be sending it that far for the exercise.'

Raymond shook his head. 'Smelt's horse is good. With Hindu out of the way it would win by a street, but the Colonel's gelding can give it a stone, very nearly. Take it from me. I've ridden both.'

Crockford shrugged. 'You should know. Very well, then. I'll see the Colonel and tell him you're already backing Hindu, you get the ride, and I collect fifty guineas.'

'That's agreed.' The jockey finished his glass.

'Just one point, Raymond. How do I know you're telling me the truth? You wouldn't be after the mount to make sure that it loses, would you?'

Raymond grinned. 'Don't be a fool, boy. You don't think I'd trick the Colonel twice, do you?'

'If you thought he'd find out, I'm sure you wouldn't.' Crockford rose and tossed a florin on the table for the service. It was a flashy gesture. 'All right. I get you the mount. You'll hear from me as soon as I've seen the Colonel.'

Just as he was leaving he paused, and smiled almost affectionately at the jockey. 'You know, Raymond, you and I can work together. What I like about you is that you're no fool. You think one move ahead. Like a chess player.'

For some reason Raymond felt vaguely flattered.

'But always remember one thing, my friend,' Crockford added, smirking. 'Always remember. That's where we're different and that's why you'll always be a pint-sized jockey. I think at least two ahead.'

Raymond grinned humourlessly. 'Fine talk for a youngster of your age I must say. You watch that you don't trip up over your own cleverness.'

'No fear of that,' the lad replied. 'Remember, Raymond. Two moves ahead. It's a trick I picked up in Billingsgate. You'll get your ride all right. Good-night.'

Outside the night was close and full of the smells of town. The linkmen's torches moved down the street; London was out and about; on such an evening no man heeded his own bed, although he may have given passing thought to the next man's. The chairmen were busy as the gallants went their way. At Vauxhall there was a big masque in progress and the night was sweet with the lilt of music. The gaming hells were already astir and the bonnets flashed their smiles, inviting the chickens to take another plunge or two. In nearby St. James's the elegant clubs of the gentry were a-bustle as men of the town arrived for supper and a game of faro, or went off hastily by sedan on romantic assignment. Out to the north, in the spas and the pleasure gardens, the shop people and the scribes took their ale, sang their songs, and smirked at their wives or wenches. It was London in high June, and a pleasant place it was, except in the Fleet sewer, where the stench was unbearable, or in such places

as Bridewell, where gaol fever was claiming its victims, or, again, in Bedlam, where the frantic raised their frenzied screams to a heedless Heaven.

The time was eleven. Crockford did not go far. London was at its most exciting, but he had no eye for such things. Instead, he walked barely fifty yards from the 'Tun', crossed the road, turned, and took up a vantage point opposite the entrance to the tavern.

Here he could see 'but not be seen, and here he waited. The crowds thinned; soon he was alone with the occasional clubman, the late revellers, the watchmen. The hours passed. One by one the patrons left the 'Tun'; even the fancy had to go to bed some time. Chairmen would stop, pick up a racing man, and disappear into the night. Now and then some new arrival would be carried up, but the night was wearing thin and the place was now nearly empty. Crockford, motionless in the shadows opposite, could tell almost exactly who was inside.

The tavern was as good as deserted when the man he had been waiting for arrived by horse.

Five minutes later Crockford moved quickly across the road. He knew where Raymond had been sitting, and he knew that he could open the door and see what was going on without in turn being noticed. He knew in advance what it was; two racing men in earnest conversation in an otherwise empty tavern.

A few seconds later and he was walking quietly down to Haymarket. He had seen enough.

He was happy. And he trudged off through the night the whole way across the city, to distant Billingsgate, where the fish market was opening. It was nearly six before he walked back up Fleet-street to Temple Bar. On his way he paused at a hazard shop to relieve the awakening proprietor of a sovereign. He decided that it was his lucky night, a view later upheld when he accosted an early seamstress near the yard behind the 'Rainbow'. The girl was dewy and fresh from sleep; her thoughts were as far from bed as they could be. Crockford made an assignation for that evening

and turned in for a few hours' sleep. That was it, he decided in a burst of self-congratulation. Think two moves ahead, not one.

The Piazza in Covent Garden was the amusement centre of the London of its day. In a capital which was at once solid and sombre, dignified and squalid, the Piazza had its own air of gaiety. On the Piazza the pulse could beat faster and a man could reclaim his youth; it was a place where anything might happen, and as often as not it did. It was light, it was colourful, it was elegant; it was discreet. It was the centre of the theatre world and the home of the better class harlots. It was the place for the brothels and the kept women, the common whores and the highborn ladies of easy virtue. It had its own chairmen, its own coffee houses, even its own clubs; more than anything it had its own code, as light and casual as its highly painted houses. You could walk around London, through the smoke and the slops, and swear that only in Covent Garden did the sun break through, to shine happily on gay flower boxes, on elegant window seats, on lovely women.

Nightly, a file of chairmen would turn east from the clubs of St. James's and carry their distinguished customers to the Piazza, where the gentry would spend an hour in furtive but delightful combat. It was a district of homes from home, a place where a man spent the time that really mattered, away from the cares of estate and the demands of matrimony. In everything the Piazza was nothing if not an accommodation; it was a street where every house knew the value of both front and back door, where a lady of quality, disguised behind her mask, could step out from her chair as casually as if she were purchasing a pair of gloves in the Arcade, and then disappear to stretch her limbs in the solace of some lowborn lover, only to depart unruffled an hour or two later, for all the world as though nothing had happened.

The Piazza learned a thousand secrets daily. And it kept them all. It was the place where, by common consent, no questions were asked and where nobody was recognised.

And it was to the house with the green shutters on the southern side of the Piazza that Crockford took himself a few nights after his encounter with Raymond.

To the ugly youth with the flair for quick reckoning the Piazza was no novelty. He had walked down it a thousand times, from the days when he was a street urchin. He had done thimble-rigging and earned himself a crown or two in its dicing shops; he had played faro in one of its hells, and he had latterly helped himself to some of its harlots, to one of whom he had taught a new trick or two. But he had done all these things as an outsider, as an ugly youth from a fish shop who had bought himself a woman because he had his wits about him and could afford one; he and his kind could patronise the Piazza when they could afford it, but they did so as interlopers, people accepted only for their money in the cheaper brothels. To enter one of the luxurious houses where the men of fashion kept their fancy women was a new experience. It meant a glimpse of a world of exquisite elegance and complete depravity, and Crockford, who delighted in depravity and envied elegance, was eager to see it from the inside. He was in his best, which did not mean much, and he had cleaned himself for the occasion. As he knocked on the door and waited he rehearsed his opening words: 'May I see Colonel Foster, please? The name is Crockford. On business.' He had the intonation by heart. Instead he said:

'Amy.'

A young woman looked at him expressionlessly. She was very young, carefully and well dressed, and very beautiful. Her low-cut gown showed her round shoulders and her colouring was very white. Crockford had little intuition and scant sense of values. But she seemed to him to be cowed and almost lifeless; odd. He would have expected something so different.

He found himself in a drawing-room, excessively ornate and furnished foppishly in the French style. He knew nothing of these things but he sensed that it was all very opulent, like a set piece rather than a home. The house, in short, was like

the young woman, exquisite but somehow without feeling.

'He's at Newmarket. He'll be back tomorrow,' Crockford found she was saying, and the voice was one he had known for years, only it came more slowly and sounded more genteel than in the old days.

Crockford leant forward eagerly. He remembered the 'Rainbow', down in Fleet-street near his shop at Temple Bar. She used to work there. That was where he'd first known her. Many a time he'd petted her in some darkened doorway when she lived just near him at St. Clements. There'd been a night in the kitchen at the tavern itself when she'd been in the mood to let him humour her. Then she'd just disappeared. Foster must have met her in his travels.

'It's like old times, meeting you like this, Amy,' he said carefully. 'Except that you look different.'

She looked at him thoughtfully for a second or two and said: 'I don't understand you. You've never seen me before. And my name's not Amy.'

Crockford grinned. 'Don't be silly. I'd know you anywhere. There's only been one Amy. I tell you what. The Colonel's at Newmarket and it's a fine evening. Put on your bonnet. And we'll go off to a masque at Ranelagh.'

She hesitated. She was still very young. 'Why not?' she asked. And for the first time she smiled. They were away for some hours and did not get back to the Piazza until after two. By then she was laughing again and the youth was flowing back in her veins. It was turned eight when Crockford left and he was tired but happy. At the door, a second before she closed it, she kissed him quickly, and he turned and walked down to the Strand with his senses heavy with memory. Again, for a few hours, she had been the girl from the 'Rainbow' kitchen, highly scented and exquisite to the touch nowadays, but still the same, eager to the embrace, squirming in the capitulation. Only Crockford had a different way of saying it.

He was tired and his eyes were full of sleep. He was also young

and he felt very pleased with himself. He had an idea that he could teach Colonel the Right Honourable Charles Edward Sebastian Foster a point or two and the thought gave him a feeling of cordiality for that elegant patron of the turf.

Surely he was a man now: he could act as go-between for jockey and owner; he could share a bed with a swell, and he could nibble forbidden sweets in the home of another man's fancy woman. It was a way of paying them back for tossing their sovereigns into the gutter so that you had to grub for them in the dung. Crockford trudged on to Billingsgate. The fish shop, which he had always hated, was becoming more and more of a nuisance. As soon as he had established his position with Foster he would get some youngster in to work it for him.

After the market Crockford celebrated the good fortune of the night by making three winning plunges on a hazard table. The world gambled and London was the dicing table of the world: life was indeed good for the gambler who could snap the odds just that shade faster than the next man, and for the youngster who thought two moves ahead.

That evening Crockford presented himself at White's Club and asked to see the Colonel only to receive a message that he could be seen at Covent Garden at breakfast time.

Crockford went home and had a much-needed sleep. He reported to the house with the green shutters at eight and was admitted by an elderly sewing woman. He waited an hour in the drawing-room where, so recently, he had progressed so knowingly through his preliminaries.

When Foster appeared he looked pink-faced and well bedded. His hair was uncovered and he wore a light gown over his linen. He was at peace with the world.

'I came to tell you, Sir, that Raymond wants to ride Hindu at the Doncaster meeting, and has offered me fifty guineas if he gets the mount.'

'Offered *you* fifty guineas?'

'Yes, Sir. He knows he's out of favour with you. But he has told me that he's backing the horse heavily, and he believes that if I pass this information on to you, Sir, he will get the ride. He says he's sure the horse will win. By riding it himself he thinks he'll make doubly sure.'

'That would be all very convenient—if I could trust him.'

'Exactly, Sir. You can't. You'll like to know that later on the same evening he was having a long talk with Smelt, the Epsom trainer, who has Timothy going up to Doncaster.'

Foster stroked his recently shaved chin. 'This is very valuable information, Crockford; very valuable.'

'If I may make a suggestion, Sir —.'

'Well?'

'I think it would be a good thing to give Raymond the ride, and to hold off any bets on Hindu until Smelt and his connections have started backing Timothy. You will then get much more generous odds.'

'You don't understand. I can't give Raymond the ride after that. The little wretch. I'll strap him until he can't stand.'

'Of course he won't ride for you, Sir. But he'll think he's got it fixed up. Which means that Smelt will feel safe and the market will be supporting Timothy. You'll get a much better price. Then, half an hour before the race, Sir, you switch your plans and put a stable boy up. They won't be able to interfere—and you'll romp home.'

Foster helped himself to a pinch of snuff. 'Damn it, you're probably right. Crockford, you're a cunning young devil. I'll give your reasoning a run for its money. Yes, that I will. See Raymond and tell 'im he'll have the mount if he approaches me in the ordinary way.'

'Excellent, Sir.'

Foster stopped abruptly. 'What do I pay you for all this?'

'I leave that to you, Sir. I would have made fifty guineas if he had been given the mount.'

'I'll double it. No I won't. I'll give you fifty guineas if the horse

wins, and I'll put you on the odds to another fifty. That'll see you're looked after."

"Thank you, Sir, you're very generous."

"But if Timothy wins—then you'd better not get inside the range of my whip. Now be off with you. You're running the biggest gamble, boy. If I ever find you tricking me I'll have you barred from the turf for a vagabond. But if this comes off I'll damn you for a shrewd young rogue, and I'll have as much work for you as ever you'll want to handle. You're no fool. If I can trust you I can use you."

"Thank you, Sir."

"But watch yourself, young man. I say again that if I ever find you're betraying me I'll skin you."

"Betraying you, Sir?" Crockford smiled. "You may rely on me."

He departed by the front door. Certainly you may rely on me Sir. While you are useful I will never betray you. Not as far as the clubs and the racehorses are concerned. Amy, of course, is different, he thought with a smirk; let me see. When was Foster going to Newmarket again? He must find out.

A stable lad duly rode Hindu, and duly won on it, exactly as Crockford had predicted. The odds, right up to the race, were more generous than they might have been. Foster did well.

It was Crockford's first coup, gained through thinking two moves ahead against a man who only thought one. On the night of the race Colonel Foster celebrated with a bumper supper in Doncaster; the jockey Raymond cursed the switch of plans and rode home slowly, suspicion in his heart. The boy Crockford did not even know the result. He knew that Foster was far in the north, so he settled down comfortably for the night in a house with green shutters in the Piazza at Covent Garden. Really, he decided, he was doing the Colonel a good turn. He was saving the girl Amy from appearing too discontented with her lot.

CHAPTER FOUR

By the time he was nineteen Crockford had adequately proved his usefulness to Colonel Foster. If the owner wanted information of a sort which he could not reasonably ask in a drawing-room, then here was the youngster to get it for him. If he needed to know where a man trained his fighting cocks, and what he fed them on, then Crockford was the fellow to find out. If, in finding out, it should chance that the cocks fought badly, then no matter. The Colonel knew nothing of the details and merely happened to profit by the occurrence. If there were matters of jockeyship to be prised from the smoke and brawling of the 'Tun' and similar taverns, then Crockford was again the lad to do the prising. An unkempt ugly youngster from Temple Bar could pass unnoticed in places where one glimpse of the Colonel himself would have set the whole town talking.

So the youth was useful to the man, and the man to the youth. Again, for the third time in his life, Crockford had formed a casual association to his own advantage. First it had been Broughton, the broken down and nearly blind old pugilist; from Broughton, whom he had cast aside as thoughtlessly as he would toss away a fish gut, he had graduated to Jackson, then champion of England and pride of the fancy. Now it was Colonel Foster, who was a very different catch indeed.

The months passed, and Crockford grew up in his knowledge of life. He was no longer the lout who appeared in a fighter's corner. The noble art, as its admirers so oddly called it, was now only a minor part of his world. Instead, he turned his attention to the racing heath, where the prizes were much greater.

Those were days when racing was little if not corrupt. The legs and the gamesters dominated the sport, and got their way

by bribery and bullying. A man who wanted to be honest could be terrified out of his straight dealing: in the workaday section of the fraternity deliberate honesty was a vanity; even among the gentry and the owners a fake result was no novelty. Horses would be substituted for each other; four-year-olds would race as three-year-olds; vicious beasts would be entered for no other purpose than to unsettle a docile favourite; starters would be bribed; jockeys would be under several competing patronages and conflicting orders. The world gambled and the world had little scruple—and racing was the most lucrative of all the gaming sciences.

Compared with the turf, even the prize ring was relatively clean, for while its hangers-on cursed and cheated over the odds, the fighters themselves mauled and battered each other into oblivion for little but the vague hope of a champion's title and the reward of the purse itself. Once the seconds were out of the ring fighting was mainly honest, whatever may have gone on before the contest; the same could not be said of the horse race, where the thrust and counter-thrust of deceit could go on and on and on across the heath.

These were the two most spectacular sports. They necessarily attracted the big money and the more daring plungers. For the poor there was coursing, with which the likes of Colonel Foster scarcely bothered, while of an evening, for rich and poor alike, there were the delights of the fighting cock. The mains drew London together and abolished the class barrier, uniting the legs and the nobility in the thrill of the battle. A cock could lift a man from the stews to the palaces; a succession of lucky mains could turn a beggar into something near a prince.

These were the main pursuits; the horse, the fighter and the main. Compared with them the others were small fry; the wrestlers, the bear-baiters, and the otter hunters were minor folk indeed, good for an odd night's amusement, but not to be taken seriously.

In this world of intrigue and dishonesty a man in Foster's

position had much need of information. It was not enough to know who was riding against him: he had also to know how his man would be riding for him. He needed advance news of form in the exhibition bouts and the training camps, as well as details of trials on the racing heath; he required to know how a man's cocks were doing, and always he liked to know the way the others were betting.

Those were days when, generally speaking, betting on horses was confined to a closed circle of owners and professional horse people. The man in the street did not back animals whose shape he would never recognise, running in the colours of an owner he would not know. The gambling at Newmarket concerned the racing people and the racing people only. All the more reason then for a man like Foster to acquire private information. If he were planning a big coup it paid to find out in advance how the betting would go.

So, in a dozen ways, Crockford proved his usefulness to his man, and gradually, at places like the 'Tun', it became accepted that the loutish youngster with the broken teeth was a by no means unimportant young fellow who sometimes placed commissions for one of the big owners. But he also took great care, as his contact with the fraternity extended, to place bets for himself so that the legs were never able exactly to tell when he was operating for the Colonel.

The arrangement was mutually profitable: it was a common one in its day. The gentry ran the horses; the legs did any dirty work that was necessary.

While all this was going on Crockford saw more and more of the colorful, roistering sporting world of the late eighteenth century. He came to know the stage coaches and many of the drivers. He would gladly gamble coach against coach down the road through Epping, or stake the cost of a week's lodging on the arrival time at Doncaster. In this way he came to know England from the south to the far north and Newmarket Heath became as familiar to him as Jermyn-street.

But much as he travelled, the gallant Colonel Foster travelled even more, a fact which was of the greatest convenience to Crockford, who was able to take advantage of the sedentary soldier's frequent absences from town to occupy his illicit bed in the house with the green shutters along the Piazza. This was the only aspect of their relationship about which the Colonel knew nothing. A simple man in these matters, he was grateful for the novelties offered by the stylish young Amy. They were inspiring after the insipid responsibilities of domesticity; the girl was increasing in ardour and charm, and Foster congratulated himself on the way he had been able to develop her. Really, she was quite the most enchanting little thing along the whole of Covent Garden, and that was saying a great deal.

So Foster went on, elegant and fastidious, a man of position and taste, the envy of all observers as he rode to Newbury behind the finest horses on the long road from London.

One day, after the receipt of a letter which was a little less florid than he might normally have expected, he found himself obliged to call on his banker. Lombard Street was a district almost unknown to him and one which he found instinctively distasteful, with its air of clatter, of much coming and going by earnest young clerks. In preparation for his interview he had arisen at the unusual hour of ten, and had breakfasted on a wing of chicken and a bottle of claret. The night before, at White's, he had lost five hundred pounds and his humour had not been improved later by detecting an air of fluster and consternation when he arrived at three in the morning at Amy's. Recovered from her apparent surprise, the young woman had received him most cordially, but Foster, although not a suspicious man, was no fool, and his instinct told him that something was wrong. He had a feeling, when he reached the house, that they were not alone. He could not account for it, and her embarrassment had only increased his suspicion. Later, in a little while, it seemed, he was reassured again. It was almost as though he had nearly met a marauder—but not quite. As the night wore on, there was nothing

in the girl's mood to suggest that he had nearly surprised her with some rival: nothing. But the feeling lingered, and at breakfast the Colonel found that anxiety corked the claret.

Suddenly he scribbled a note, called a chairman from the window, and sent the man on an errand.

Less than an hour later, in answer to his summons, Crockford appeared. They were alone in the dining-room. Foster went straight to the point.

'You've done all sorts of jobs for me in the last year or two,' he said grimly. 'Now I'm going to try on you something else. You know — you know the lady of the house here?'

'I've seen her when I've brought you information, Sir.'

'Very good. Her name's Amy. Amy Verdun. Keep this to yourself. I've reason to suspect that there's another admirer somewhere.'

'I see, Sir.'

'I felt last night — well, it doesn't matter. I needn't go into details. I want you to watch the house. If there's another lover . . .' He hesitated. 'I want to know at once — and I also want to know who he is.' The Colonel's voice was hard. In his circle it was accepted that a man could have a discreet establishment in Covent Garden; it was not accepted that a man of equal standing should call and help himself to forbidden bon-bons. 'If he's a gentleman I'll know how to act. If he's some lowdown fellow I'll break every bone in his body. And then I'll throw them both out.'

'You may rely on me, Sir.'

'Splendid. You've made yourself a very useful fellow, Crockford. I'm very pleased with you. You've done good work in a hundred ways.' Foster relaxed. Perhaps his suspicions were unfounded, after all. 'That's what I like about you. I can trust you.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

'One important point. I'm off to Hereford next week and I'll be away for a month. Keep your eyes open. If she's carrying on — well, that's when you'll find out.'

'You'll be away for a month, Sir?'

‘A month.’

‘I’ll give you a full report when you’re back, Sir. That’s if there’s anything to report, of course.’

‘Of course.’ The Colonel finished his breakfast. Lombard-street seemed less urgent somehow. He preferred to stay on the Piazza and make sure: it was not until the end of the week that he finally went down to the City.

When he did, he was received with the, respectful ceremony which the merchant bankers reserved for their more lucrative clients. He passed through the general office into the parlour at the back. There, to his surprise, he found not one but three partners seated waiting for him, their tall hats firm on their heads in the affectation of their calling.

‘Colonel Foster, Sir,’ said the senior banker, fumbling with a paper knife, ‘my partners and I have paid most careful attention to your case — and are prepared to advance you another fifty thousand pounds.’

‘Excellent.’

‘But frankly, Sir, this is the last, unless you find yourself able to increase your security. Your principal assets, Sir, now appear to consist of so many racehorses. In the City we prefer to put our funds into something safer.’

‘Quite so,’ Foster answered evenly. ‘Well, I hope I shan’t have to borrow any more. Why, my dear man, if Trotter wins the Derby next year I may even start paying you back.’

‘That would certainly be unusual, if I may say so without disrespect, Sir. Permit me, as an old friend — and I might even say admirer — of your family, to say that if you gambled a little less and gave a little more attention to your estates you wouldn’t have had to borrow in the first place.’

‘Give up gambling? But it’s the spice of life. Good heavens. Everybody gambles. This is the gambling age. The poor have the lotteries and the hazard shops: we have White’s and Buck’s. It’s either the hells or the clubs. The man of title risks his inheritance, and the tradesman plunges his whole stock at cards. It’s

the same throughout life, my dear Sir. It always was—and it always will be.'

The banker hesitated. He had grown rich, watching other people lose money. 'Gambling, Sir, is the curse of the age.' It was a subject on which he felt deeply, although indirectly other people's card losses had been a source of much activity and turnover in his ledgers. 'If you sat in this parlour, Colonel Foster, you would see how the disease is devitalising the entire nobility of England. Whole estates are mortgaged to the money-lenders.'

'To people such as yourself in short, Sir. You should be the last to complain.'

The banker coughed. 'It is true, Sir, that the gaming craze has contributed to the extent of our business. That gives it no virtue in our eyes, I can assure you. Very much the reverse. Put yourself in my place, Sir, and consider how you would feel if you saw family after family staking its future in the gambling book at your own club—or on the horses. I tell you, Sir, an entirely new aristocracy is growing up in England today—a nobility of touts and card players and racing tricksters. The real nobility is pouring out its substance in this craze for quick profit.'

'And gaining in character from doing so,' said Foster easily. 'Why, my dear Sir, gaming and horse racing present unrivalled opportunities for young men of character and courage.'

'Character and courage, Sir? Surely not. You mean cowardice and deceit.'

'Courage, Sir, I said. Courage.' Foster helped himself to snuff. 'Gambling is born in the Englishman, Sir, and let's have no argument on the point. Why, only this morning I heard of a game of cribbage—ten thousand and one points up at a sovereign a point—between a butcher in King Street and some young fellow from the taverns. The whole town's talking about it. They've been playing without a stop since Wednesday evening—and they'll finish tonight. We're all going along to see the last hands. And don't tell me that this isn't character building. Crib-

bage, Sir, cribbage of all games! At a sovereign a point . . . Now, Sir, no more sermonising, please. Let us to business.'

The 'Grapes' in King-street differed from the 'Tun' only in the people who patronised it. Whereas the 'Tun' belonged to the turf, the 'Grapes' was the meeting-place for the successful tradesmen of St. James's, people who were fond of giving themselves the airs of the gentry on whom they thrived. So the 'Grapes' prided itself on the standard of its dinner ordinary, with grouse and pheasant in season, and with the best French wines available at moderate prices. A tailor who had succeeded in getting his bills paid by the nobility could dine well for a shilling and buy a bottle or two of a decent claret at sixpence a time. Yes, the 'Grapes' liked to consider that it had an air about it, almost like one of the clubs of St. James's, and if on holidays and Saturday nights its patrons relented and drank themselves into a singing carousing crew of luckily successful trade touts, for the rest of the year they were as careful and as well behaved a set of men as ever you would find in London. It was a tavern where drabs and whores were practically unknown and where no man would take another man's wife.

But tonight the 'Grapes' had a different air. Word of its cribbage match had passed around the town, from the clubs to the coffee houses, from the houses to the taverns and sporting rooms. A youngster from the racing world, it was learned, had challenged Smith, the King-street butcher, for a sovereign a peg over ten thousand and one holes. And as the match neared its climax the sportsmen and the gamesters converged on the 'Grapes' to shout the odds. With each shuffle of the cards there was clamorous wagering on the deal. The play of each hand would be preceded by a quick auction among the onlookers. As the players approached turn after turn of the board a shout would go up offering odds about the next log. And so it had gone on, with increasing enthusiasm, ever since the start, the two players scarcely moving from the table, eating their food as they called for it, the cards be-

coming more and more greasy as the deals mounted. All through the first day, all through the first night, and now through the second day and into the night they were playing, grey with tiredness and lack of fresh air, their words scarcely audible as they called their hands, the onlookers pressing increasingly around them, so that they were two exhausted men, seated alone in a hurly-burly of jabbering, gesticulating gamblers.

At last, long after the second midnight, the tension started to ease. The younger man had increased his lead to a point where it was now simply a question of how many pegs he would win by. The gambling among the onlookers, deal by deal, continued, the odds were shouted just as regularly, men laid fifteen to one against a twelve-in-hand and found just as many takers. But the issue itself was no longer in doubt.

Crockford closed his eyes wearily. A mosaic of playing cards, dirty, stained with food and grime, seemed to swim before his vision even then. But it was now merely a matter of how much he won. He was two thousand points ahead, and only needed another five hundred for game. Nothing but a series of miracles could prevent him from winning by a large margin.

'All right, Butcher,' he found himself saying quietly, opening his eyes again. Even a snatched rest of only a few seconds was a relief. 'It's my deal.' He shuffled. 'Waiter. Fetch me a couple of cold chops, and a few potatoes, and bring me a bottle of claret.'

The betting rose to a crescendo around him. 'Tens against twelve in his crib.' 'Five to four he gets ten on the two.' 'Twenty-five to one against the butcher.'

But on this last bet there were no takers.,

'I lay thirty-three to one against the butcher,' called a well-known leg. He booked two smallish bets.

Crockford finished the shuffle; the butcher cut the cards.

'Quiet please. Quiet everybody,' somebody called.

The butcher looked up from a survey of his cards.

'Waiter. Get me a cut of sirloin — cold — and a large onion.

I hope you'll be paying for it, Crockford. I won't be able to.'

'I can afford it. Your down.'

'One.'

'Eight.'

'Nine.'

'Sixteen.'

'Eighteen.'

'Twenty-five.'

'Twenty-eight and 'one for a go.' The butcher pegged up a point.

'That saves him a sovereign,' murmured Colonel Foster, who had just arrived among the spectators.

The butcher spread his cards. 'Fifteen two; fifteen four. And one — two — three; one — two — three is ten; and a pair's twelve.'

'Not bad but I can do better.' Crockford turned his hand and counted at speed, his voice almost inaudible with tiredness. 'Fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six and three pairs is twelve; and seven, eight, nine, seven, eight, nine and seven, eight, nine is twenty-one.'

He threw the cards in as the onlookers babbled with excitement. 'Now let's see what I've got in the box.'

Two hours later it was all over: the legs and the betting men had gone; the gamblers had moved on to the gaming hells; the quality, their curiosity over an unusual money match appeased, had strolled off to their clubs. Waiters were cleaning up; only a night bird or two remained drinking late ale, or sipping Madeira. The respectable tradesmen of St. James's, whose patronage gave the 'Grapes' its reputation, were home in bed.

Two men walked out into the early morning sunshine. The butcher turned to King-street and his shop, the sale of which was now inevitable.

The other hailed a chairman and called for Temple Bar. In his pocket was a bill for seventeen hundred pounds. It was a fortune. A new gambling star had appeared in London. Crockford

was on the way up. He was now rich, rich enough to start gaming houses of his own as soon as he wanted; already he had put a man in to manage his fish business on his mother's behalf; he still lived over the bulk shop and the place stank of stale fish.

Crockford paid off the chairman and climbed the stairs to bed. He was twenty, he was tired, he was living far beyond his physique; and his nose was offended by the reek of fish.

He examined the bill, the first he had ever received, and decided to have a short nap until the banks opened. It was his moment of triumph, a morning when new worlds were opened up. Vaguely, for there was nothing of the poet and little of the thinker in his make-up, he was aware that he had passed a climax in his life. Crockford the small betting boy belonged to the past. In future it would be Crockford, the successful sportsman.

As he turned into bed he found himself thinking of many things. He decided that he would still keep up his connection with Foster. The man was useful in a hundred ways. And meanwhile he had next month to look forward to, when the fellow would be in Hereford and Amy would be waiting anxiously in the house with the green shutters. Heigh ho! He had seventeen hundred pounds, apart from his savings. The world was really very amusing.

There was one person to whom he did not trouble to give a second thought — Smith, the butcher from King-street, who had just lost his business.

After defeating the butcher at cribbage Crockford was able to expand his activities. He now had capital. He took a lease on a small hell off King-street, refurnished it, employed a croupier named Gye, and offered a hazard table to a waiting world. Night by night, his trade card announced, he was able to put up a bank of five hundred pounds. It was not a great sum; there were many much bigger hazard banks: but it was size enough to attract a regular clientele. Before long Crockford found himself providing free suppers and offering free wine to his gamblers:

his generosity appeared to pay: his table was a good one. He knew enough about the markets to have a shrewd idea where and what to buy.

Within a few weeks of buying his hell Crockford was making money. The cards and the dice were running his way. In the case of the cards he was winning because his knowledge of the odds was greater and his snap judgment just that shade quicker than that of the next man.

He owed part of his success with the dice to his skill at the throw, which he knew as an art.

Once graduated, once established as a gaming party proprietor, Crockford took a step he had been anxious to take for some years.

He left Temple Bar, and hired a small house for himself in Half Moon-street, that very respectable place with its literary air, just up from the farms below Piccadilly. It was an out of the way address for one of the fancy, most of whom never went west from St. James's. But Crockford liked to be different, and he liked the tang of the morning air, coming up from the hayfields. It was a compensation after the years he had spent in the whiff of fish. When he moved in he wished he could dress as befitted a young man in his new station; he liked to study the way Colonel Foster looked after these matters. He liked the splash of fine colour, and he even dressed more carefully, on the rare occasions when he was alone in his room for an hour or two, than he did when he was out and about. For Crockford had a deep sense of what the world would have considered the fitness of things; he knew what was right: he knew that a young leg dressed shabbily and looked grimy; he knew that good linen was for the gentry. One day he would be rich enough to wear it and be damned to them. As yet, while he still had to serve them he must act the part.

So Crockford no longer went to Billingsgate. He had a hand to run the business. If there was trouble, then he would see to it himself. He was a good son in his fashion. All he asked was that he should get away from Temple Bar.

Get away from it he did, and immediately, but the gibe still followed him. The young legs who had known him from the days when he stood in Jackson's corner knew him as 'the Fish-monger', and the name was to stay with him until his last day. He was born over a fish shop. The world, because his enemies sensed that he was sensitive about it, determined that he would never forget it. And he never did.

A little more than a month after his cribbage battle, he received a call to Colonel Foster's house in the village of Bayswater. The Colonel was one of the many men of fashion who had lately adopted the district, where they could keep their town stables and conduct their establishments in a manner suited to their standing in life. There was much to be said for living in the middle of London but space was crowded and hard to come by. For the extra trouble of the short journey a man could live in real style in Bayswater.

They met in the library, a lofty elegant room in which there were many hundreds of beautifully bound volumes, at least a dozen of which were familiar to their owner. The Fosters were not an erudite family. They produced soldiers and horsemen, men of action. Foster himself, as became the elder son, had a place which was merely a small villa compared with the family seat at Hereford, but which surpassed in splendour anything Crockford had seen or was ever likely to see. The young man was shocked and impressed by the air and elegance of the room: it stood for imponderable things which could never be bought in Temple Bar. Impetuously, he resolved to have such a house of his own one day.

Foster waited until the footman had closed the door, and smiled. It was early, and if the news was good the evening would be full of promise. The late summer sunshine streamed through the windows. He had travelled a long way and he was tired.

'Let's drink to your success at cribbage.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

Foster grinned over his glass. Among his equals he had the

reputation for being a bit of an eccentric. He liked to consider himself a collector of odd characters. And here he was, entertaining a leg in his library. Not a man in his set would have allowed the fellow within a mile of the place — not without setting the dogs loose, anyway. The idea of offering the fellow a drink . . . Writing people like that man Johnson would have damned Foster for a radical. Not that he was, of course. Very much the reverse. He and his like stood for tradition — a first class tradition, which had treated them very well, and which they implicitly believed in. But in his own home a man could sometimes indulge his fancy, particularly when Mrs. Foster was away taking those infernal waters at Bath again. So Foster poured himself a second pint of Madeira and raised his glass. It amused him to study the fellow, gauche and uncomfortable, yet so extraordinarily quick in some ways. If he kept his head he might go far — even if it were only to the Antipodes for life deportation.

‘Good luck, Crockford.’

‘Thank you, Sir. My best respects.’

‘Nonsense. You haven’t any respect for anybody, and you know it.’ He smiled amiably. The lad was large and ugly and his teeth were horrible. His hands were disgusting. His dress was drab but at least tidy. His breeches were stained with food. Yet Foster had an idea that he’d been tidying himself up a bit, paying attention to his personal appearance. Perhaps the youth was paying court to some tradesman’s daughter, or perhaps he was just developing ideas above his station.

‘Well now Crockford, I only got back from Hereford this afternoon. It occurred to me that you might have one or two items to report before I visited the town.’ Foster smiled again. Perfectly safe, letting the man in to his home here: there was nothing he could do. If he so much as dared to mention Covent Garden in any threatening way he’d swear a charge and have the young villain thrashed out of the country inside a week.

‘There are several things to report, Sir,’ said Crockford, sipping his Madeira. He could keep his head and he never let

drink get the better of him. But, slowly, he was acquiring a liking for it. 'First of all, here are this morning's exercise details from Epsom. You'll note what happened with Truant, trained by Eston, Sir.' He handed his patron a slip of paper.

'Thank you, Crockford. This will be very useful.'

'I've had to make special arrangements down at Epsom, Sir, and I'm afraid it's going to cost us rather more than you at first reckoned.'

'Don't worry with details. If I get the information I'm happy to pay for it. What next?'

Crockford produced a notebook and tore out some pages. 'These are the gallops from Newmarket Heath for the last month, Sir.'

'Thank you.' Foster put the notes in a drawer in his escritoire. 'They'll be very useful, too.' There was the slightest suggestion of asperity in his tone, as though he did not wish to be kept waiting too long. 'Anything else?'

'I've got a report on this fighter Jenkins. He's no good. You can back the Game Chicken against him.'

'Are you certain of that?'

'Positive. I spent a day with Jenkins at his camp and was able to assure him that he would by carrying my money. Actually, I'll back the Chicken.'

'That's good enough. I don't suppose you throw your ill-gotten gains away.'

'And here, Sir, are lists of bets which I've traced to your jockey in the last month.'

'Excellent. You're the most useful rogue in all London. I suppose I'll be losing you now, won't I, Crockford? Now you've bankrupted that butcher you're too rich to work for the nobility surely?'

'I'll never be too rich to work for you, Sir. You know that.'

'Not while we can find uses for each other, of course. Have another glass. How old are you now, Crockford? Twenty-two?'

'No, twenty.'

'You've had quite a career, my lad. And you've kept out of gaol. It's remarkable. I wonder how long it will last. Why, it seems only yesterday that you came crawling in to me, stinking of fish.'

'I've worked hard getting the smell out of my system, Sir.'

'I don't know why you should. You'll always be a fishmonger to your enemies, my boy. And the more successful you get the more enemies you'll have.' Foster turned to business without a change of tone. 'What else?'

'I looked into the matter you were interested in in Covent Garden, Sir.'

'Yes?'

'I kept the closest touch, Sir. The closest touch.' The ugly face was quite expressionless. 'You can be quite sure that there were no visitors, Sir.'

'There weren't.' Foster sighed. He had been worried.

'None at all, Sir. The — the lady appears to live very quietly, hardly ever going out.'

'Thank you, Crockford.' Foster decided to go along to White's for an hour or two and make off to the Piazza bright and early. 'What about yourself — you've been busy?'

'Hardly, Sir. I've been collecting your various bits of information and running my new gaming house. It's not left me any time for education.'

'Damn it, you're becoming positively witty. Education indeed. What does a lad with a tongue as glib as yours want with education? It might knock some of the conceit out of you — which would be dangerous in your trade.' Foster put down his glass. The interview was closed. 'Crockford, in future I shall pay you rather differently. A sovereign or two for running errands isn't exactly the right reward any longer. I'm running Herod at York next Saturday week — and I'm putting you on the odds to ten guineas. Win or lose that will cover you for the notes you have brought in tonight. Agreed?'

'Thank you, Sir.'

'If you want me during the next week you can probably get me — at the Piazza. Understand?'

'Perfectly, Sir.'

Crockford walked back across the fields, up past Tyburn, and down over Tottenham Court Road — a long walk, but a pleasant one, with the flowers high in the cottage gardens and the honeysuckle heady from the hedges. So Foster would be off to York again soon. That meant that he, Crockford, would be expected to spend more time at the Piazza. It was becoming a nuisance. There was the new gaming house to watch and a man had no time left over for wenching. The girl was demanding far too much attention. A man had his career to think of. Why, night after night, at the gaming rooms off King-street, he, Crockford, was standing to lose a fortune. And he had to be bothered with the persistent Amy. He turned into St. Giles, then one of the worst stews in London. The dingy gin shops were almost deserted, for the night was warm and young. Here and there a hazard shop was open on to the street, and some tout was rolling the dice noisily, calling out to passers-by to stop and make a fortune. At other shops thimble-riggers were inviting victims. Elsewhere crafty young men were offering to sell parts of tickets in the latest state lottery; whores and drabs were out early on their evening prowl. Touts and pimps jostled with the beggars in the stifling, evil-smelling streets. Rats scampered into narrow and gloomy alleys off the main roads. A scream went up from a gin shop as he walked past and a hag ran out into the gutter, her face spurting blood. She was followed by a man who proceeded to belabour her with a strap. A crowd gathered, mildly curious. The drab sank to the ground, howling and exhausted; the man wiped sweat from his eyes and disappeared into the alleyways, a dog licked at the woman and the crowd dispersed, curious no more.

Crockford stopped and watched a hazard table. Suddenly he plunged a sovereign, lost, and moved on. The proprietor picked up the gold piece, spat on it, and looked up with curiosity. Sovereigns were rarities in St. Giles. The swells who could afford

to play for them preferred the comforts west of Haymarket.

Two men and a woman were locked in the stocks north of St. Martin's and the crowd was enjoying itself pelting them with stones and vegetable refuse. One of the men was moaning; his left eye had been almost knocked out and was now sightless. The target was too good to be missed and the crowd showed him distinct favour. The blood dripped down steadily from the cross-piece to the ground and the pelting went on happily. It was summer; it was London; it was fun.

Crockford turned in to his gaming home hard by King-street, took a glass of Madeira, ate a good cut of sirloin and prepared to take the faro bank himself. Expertly, he swatted a fly with his hand and grinned as it buzzed inside his cupped fist. Then he extracted it knowledgeably, pulled off its wings one by one and watched it crawl slowly round his plate. Two of them would make a good subject for a bet. He made a mental note of it. Outside his patrons were just arriving.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE time was 1801 and the place was London. A new century had started. It was a year in which the world of William Crockford flourished exceedingly. To his gaming shop just behind King-street he had now added another north of Jermyn-street, hard by Piccadilly. At both he produced a fine table and entertained his guests with the utmost liberality while his croupiers fleeced them. The choice of game he left to the players. If it was faro the house was merely referee, taking a commission from the winning coups. If it was hazard then the house opened the bank and backed against all comers. Either game was highly profitable, but hazard was the better, for the dice could be astutely handled.

By this time Crockford had formed a firm association with Gye, who was tall, thin, squint-eyed, of reedy voice and nearly twenty years the young man's senior. Gye, like Crockford, had been spewed up from the stews of London, but whereas Crockford came from Temple Bar, which was almost affluent, Gye came from St. Giles itself. Like Crockford, he had served a hard apprenticeship to this trade, thimble-rigging, touting, throwing the hazard dice, or acting as croupier. He knew the odds and the moves to a nicety. He could calculate quicker than the next man, unless it chanced that the next man was Crockford himself. He had a gash down his left cheek where a frenzied gambler had lunged at him with a knife, and his manners had the unemotional aloofness of the man whose life it is to run the bank for the house. Crockford was the captain; Gye the lieutenant. Between them they were a fierce combination, ruthless in their determination to squeeze the last penny from their victims, only too anxious to improve the standard of their viands and their wines if it would attract the more wealthy players.

So Gye went on, night after night, supervising the two gaming

hells, spitting his profanities and his sarcasms at his employees. He took a great deal of the routine work off Crockford's hands. The difference between him and his senior was that only the younger man was adventurous. Gye was himself no gambler. He was quite content to take the orders in return for the wage. If the bank failed and the wage ceased he would move along immediately to another house. The world speculated but he accumulated. His skin was yellow as ivory, and he had a restless cough; he lived in a garret in the very St. Giles in which he had been born. He hoarded his earnings and the money he made by chicanery; it never occurred to him to branch out; he had none of Crockford's ambition. Where Crockford was anxious to take the risk, Gye was all for safety. He sensed that the young man had a flair and a future, and he was happy to serve him. It was a relationship which was to last until death, and both men grew rich out of it.

King-street and the hell north of Jermyn-street were the beginning. It was Crockford who saw the opportunity that was to lead them both forward.

It happened that one night Gye had sent a message that he would not be able to work. He stayed behind in his room at the north end of St. Giles, coughing up his coloured sputum. Crockford, called by messenger at his house in Half Moon-street, cursed the news from King-street, where the bank had been increased to seven hundred pounds. Crockford could run a bank better than almost anyone, and certainly as well as could Gye, but he was already realising that the wise man was the one who let other people do the work for him. He preferred to put up the risk and take the profit. This time, however, there was nothing for it. He had nobody trained to handle the hazard dice as well as he or Gye. He sent word that Smithson, an old lag who worked for him at King-street, was to open the bank and that he would be down by midnight.

He dressed carefully. He had a presentiment that the night would be important. Smithson might be winning, or he might be losing. As likely as not there would be precious little in it.

It was amusing to leave a novice in charge, and then to go down there, not knowing how much there was to come, or how much he needed to recover. It was a new form of gamble, and while he dressed Crockford toyed with the idea of starting up a whole string of new hells throughout the town and watching them run themselves. Then, just as soon as they started losing money, if they ever did start losing, he could move in himself and proceed to fight his way back to a profit. So thinking, he dined lightly, dismissed a young woman named Theresa who had become established as successor to the now dreary Amy, and set off to King-street, arriving at about ten. He liked to surprise his bonnets and his waiters by turning up before he was expected.

King-street, like all properly organised hells, had two entrances, one from the street admitting the players, the other at the side for the owner and such staff as there might be. Between the gaming room and the proprietor's den there would always be a peephole so that the man who was risking the bank could satisfy himself not only on the way the game was going, but on the behaviour of his croupier. The gaming room, invariably, would be plainly furnished; there would be the main table, on which the players could stake their bets, and there would be seats for about two dozen people. There would be little or no standing room. The standing gambler could be a nuisance, and the hell owners knew from experience where to look for danger. The lights would be as high up as possible, so that a losing player could not get reckless with oil or candle, and the heating would usually come from a shuttered stove; when a man was fighting to retain his inheritance it was a good thing to make sure that he had no poker or fire-tongs around. Such things could be dangerous.

Off the main room would be an ante-room where supper and refreshments would be served. This was a rule in even the meanest hell in Fleet-street or St. Giles. People playing for pennies expected their tots of gin; gamblers plunging shillings demanded a good supper, with meat pies and the like in season.

In the higher class hells the cuisine could be among the best in the land, rivalling that to be found in even the most exclusive men's clubs in St. James's. By the generosity of its table and the range and liberality of its cellar you could judge a gaming house; the poorer hell would dispense gin and eel pies. Those appealing to the tradesmen and the clerks would be more prodigal. If a house aimed at the really monied gamblers it did two things; it advertised a large nightly bank on its trade cards, in the prints and through the toasts; and it produced a sidetable which would have cost many shillings at a place like White's.

Crockford, when he had bought his first rooms in King-street, had determined to offer nothing but the best. He paid for choice fruits from France and Italy; he paid for rare vegetables from Cornwall; he paid for the best meats from Smithfield, for the choicest cuts of salmon from Billingsgate. He found a cook who understood wine and his clarets were favourably commended. He learned to smile while a scrivener who had lost no more than half a sovereign would proceed to munch his way through a large helping of Strasbourg pâté, a cut of the best salmon, and half a dozen lamb chops; the whole would be washed down with a couple of bottles of Renish wine. The cost made a large hole in the small coin, but these things were inevitable. The excellence of a man's table could do more to advertise his rooms than any number of bonnets. Crockford stuck to his policy. It was paying very handsomely.

That night, when he arrived by the side door, a waiter told him that he was wanted urgently. He went inside to find Griggs, who supervised the gaming room, looking worried. Griggs was twice Crockford's age, a born servant in gaming hells, in which he had started at the age of ten.

'Crockford,' he said anxiously, 'we've been looking all over London for you since we sent that message. There's a woman at the tables owing five hundred pounds and she can't pay.'

'Wait a minute,' Crockford answered quietly. 'What exactly did you say?'

'I said there was a woman who can't pay and who owes five hundred pounds.'

'Listen, Griggs. You said Crockford. Understand? You said Crockford. Don't say it again. See? It's Mister Crockford to you. Or it's Sir. Get me? Don't forget again or I'll kick your teeth in. Understand? Who is she?'

'I don't know her.'

'You should. Let's go and look. And keep a civil tongue in your head. When I'm dealing with the gentry I bow and scrape. But when I'm dealing with the likes of you I get the bowing and the scraping. And remember it. Come on.'

'They walked down a passage and Griggs pulled aside a panel to reveal a thick tapestry. Crockford fumbled with it for a minute, found the peep hole and peered through. 'Where is she?' he asked. Suddenly he whistled. 'You mean that woman next to the dealer?'

'Yes,' said Griggs. Suddenly he gasped with pain. 'Let go my arm. Let go!' He shuddered: 'You're breaking it.'

'Yes, what?' Crockford asked. 'Yes what?' He twisted the arm again. 'Come on. Yes what?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'That's better.' Crockford released him. 'Next time I'll break it for you — understand? Now get down there quick. Remember to be polite. Treat her like a queen. And ask her if she'd mind coming through to see the proprietor.'

'What's the idea? Just because she's well dressed and she may be good looking behind the mask?'

'You fool. She can't disguise herself by wearing a mask. Anybody could tell who she is. I'm not interested in the woman. I'm interested in the title. That's the Countess of Merry.'

'Never heard of her.'

'Of course you haven't, Griggs. That's why you'll always be a third-rate hanger-on and will never get anywhere except on the charity of people like me. That's why I'm boss here. I know what's going on and who's what — and you don't.' He snapped

his fingers. 'This is the best bit of luck we've had since we set up in business. Get her up here at once.'

He returned to his room and quickly gave it a superficial tidying. Luck had served him up one of the society gamblers, the women whose doings were the subject of lampoons on the doorposts and satires in the coffee house prints. If he couldn't impress her, and use her, then his name wasn't William Crockford. Again he sensed a great opportunity, as when he had called on Colonel Foster. He arranged a chair on the opposite side of his desk, and blessed the extravagance which had made him re-furnish the room when he first bought the place. He must have had a premonition that something like this would happen. It created a good impression; it was neat and tidy; it was clean. It was reassuring. Crockford went to the glass. He looked as ugly as ever and his teeth were horrible when he smiled. His big frame was fleshy but powerful and his hands were the ham fists of a bruiser. But his dress was quiet and discreet, and, really, he had come a long way since the days when he had first stepped off from Temple Bar. Here he was about to drive a bargain with a woman of the peerage, for in his mind, working as fast as ever, he already knew exactly what arrangement he would make with her. It was a good position to be in. He grinned to himself and resolved to exploit it. It was like dealing a marked pack.

'Good evening,' he said, as the door opened. 'Will you take a chair?'

'No thank you. Are you the proprietor?' She was tall and he knew that she was very lovely. She brought perfume in with her. Her face was hidden behind a mask, of the type affected by so many gamblers. The fad was a mixture of superstition, the urge to control and hide the feelings, and the desire not to be seen and identified. In the common hells hardly anybody wore masks, but in the more reckless gaming clubs most people covered their faces.

'I am.'

'You surprise me. You don't look more than a boy.'

She was heavily wigged, he noticed, and her brocade gown was in the new style with the flared skirt. He had seen such people going to the masques at places like Vauxhall. Undoubtedly she was the most colourful as well as the most valuable fish he had ever netted.

'How much do you owe the bank downstairs?' he asked, ignoring her remark. He judged that she was in her thirties, and it would have been very easy to have wanted her. But there was more important business.

'Five hundred pounds.'

'And it isn't convenient to pay at the moment?'

'I've been losing steadily for months. I came here hoping to change my luck. I could repudiate the debt, you know. You could not recover it.'

'You could, Madam, but you wouldn't.'

'No, I wouldn't. I'll pay you. But I can't offer you any security at the moment.'

'Your jewellery is already entailed, I take it?'

'That is my affair.'

'You could borrow the money from your husband?'

'How do you know I ever have a husband?'

'Lady Merry —'

'How do you know my name? I don't normally announce myself in places like this.'

'I've made it my job to know all the really important hazard players in London — in the hope that they'd one day come and dice with me.'

'You'll have to offer them a better house than this one.'

'Don't worry. One of these days I'll offer them the finest in all London, built especially for the purpose. And they'll fall over themselves for the honour of losing money to me.' He smiled.

'You give yourself fine airs for a hell owner, young man. You talk as if you were in business — instead of being one move ahead of the magistrates and the whipping post. Now about this money. I'll give you a bill — for January the first.'

'When your interest from the Funds falls due, your Ladyship? No, if you sit down I can make you a much better offer than that.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm prepared to cancel the debt altogether — and to take over the one you incurred last night at Chatham's.'

'How do you know about that?'

'I pay good money for information. I repeat — I'll cancel the whole thing out on one condition.'

Downstairs the hazard game was progressing normally. The dice box was passing the round of the players. The croupier, sphinx-faced as ever, was making his calls: 'Faites vos jeux, messieurs, mesdames. Faites vos jeux.' The dice were rattling in the box and from the gamblers came the babble of the score position: 'Nine's the main.' Then the dice would rattle and clatter out on to the table and from the players would come the words: 'He throws out.' Another coup had ended in failure and the box passed on.

Upstairs Lady Merry looked steadily across the desk. She had dropped her mask. Her face was hard but beautiful. She was a woman of vast experience and she liked gambling in all things. Her mouth was generous and her eyes, which were grey, were touched off with a large beauty patch over her left cheek-bone. She was in her full thirties, powerful, and aware of her power.

'How do you know I won't cheat you if we agree?' she asked. Crockford smiled. Everything was working out exactly as he had planned it. 'Lady Merry, you will cheat me. I expect that.'

She turned to him angrily. 'I may lose, but I don't cheat.'

'Of course you do. You sat down tonight and lost money you couldn't pay. Isn't that cheating? Why should I expect you not to cheat me when we go into business together? On the contrary. Of course you will.' He laughed. 'But I'll have my own ways of watching you. I'll be checking all the time. And even though you swindle me all round the clock I'll still be making a very large profit. Well, do you agree?'

'You've the impudence of a powder monkey. You insult me

to my face, call me a cheat, and expect me to lose my reputation to help you make money.'

'Lady Merry, don't let's waste time. When it comes to gambling you've no reputation to lose. And you'd be making most of the money out of it anyway.'

She hesitated. 'I'll say this,' she said slowly. 'I think I could get quite a bit of amusement out of it.'

'Then do you agree?'

'Very well. I agree.'

'Excellent. From now on we're partners. I'll accept your bill for next January, though, just to help you keep your word.'

'All right. We know where we are. I'll meet you here tomorrow and you can give me the details.' She rose and her mask covered her face again. 'You're an odd card, young man. When you looked at me like that just now and said you were prepared to let me off on one condition, I thought — well, for a moment I thought you had something quite different in mind.'

Crockford smiled. It would have been very easy and extremely delectable to have taken the mask from her face and wrenched the low cut gown off her shoulders. He had an idea that she would have been laughing as she struggled, and that she wouldn't have wanted to struggle for long. As calmly as he put his bets on the hazard table he resolved to sample the dish at the right time.

'You thought . . . If I may say so, your Ladyship, you deceive yourself.' Deceive. It was a good word. Not one of the youngsters with whom he had been whelped in Temple Bar would even have known how to spell it.

CHAPTER SIX

IT was October and long after sunset. The wind was high and the night black. Assuredly it was no time for a lone horseman to be about on the roads of England, for these were lawless times and the highwaymen seemed to have eyes in the dark. Even the stage coaches were not safe from the exploits of these scoundrels. But the law, whatever the prints might say, was holding its own in the fight against crime, as the swinging bodies strung from the wayside gibbets testified. Swaying there in the wind with only the flies to keep them company, were the highwaymen who had made the mistake of getting caught. Those who were still at liberty nowadays seemed additionally dangerous.

Clattering down the great road from York came a barouche, its outriders swinging lanterns and its driver proceeding at speed. It rattled across Barnby Moor at a speed that would have put the stage to shame, and it pulled up at the posting inn on the far side, the horses blowing noisily from their gallop through the cold east wind. Colonel Foster, who had been handling the team himself, stepped down. His face was so cold that it had little feeling left. His eyes were keen from staring out beyond the lamps into the night. He liked nothing more than a night drive, with its touch of danger, and he was in high fettle. He planned to make London by tomorrow night, too, fantastic as that might seem to anyone with an ordinary string of horses. Why, there was no one on the road today who could hold his own with him over such a distance, and he had one very good reason for wanting to get back to the city. That reason was in Covent Garden, in the house of the green shutters.

'Ostler!' he called, 'look after the horses. Keep an eye on him, men, and see they're watered properly. Then look after your-

selves. Turn in early. I want to be on the road again by five.'

He walked briskly through the courtyard to the tavern.

'Colonel Foster, Sir,' said the landlord, bowing. 'Happy to see you, Sir.'

'Good evening, Charles. Is the baron of beef ready?'

'Done to a turn, Sir. And some smart gentlemen going north from London to help you eat it.'

'Fine. Then get a couple of dozen of your best claret and send me the prettiest chambermaid on the whole York Road to help me get my boots off.'

'My niece will look after you herself, Sir.'

Half an hour later, washed and refreshed, Foster was down in the main hall, where a dozen racing men whom he knew from Newmarket and London were clustered round the fire. Most of them were owners, men of his own class, who hunted all winter and raced all summer. They greet warmly.

'You aren't missing the Doncaster meeting, surely?' one of them asked him.

'Yes. I've been away for weeks. Now I've urgent business in London.'

'Business, Colonel? What on earth does a man in your station want with business?'

The Colonel smiled. 'This is very particular business, connected with a young woman with red hair.' There was a general chortle. 'Tell me, what's the news from the clubs?'

'You've heard about Lady Buckingham? That's a real tit-bit of scandal for you.' The speaker was Sanders, a young peer who owned one of the best stayers in the country.

'No. What's she been up to now?'

'My dear fellow, she's been before the beak and fined fifty pounds for keeping a common gaming house. There were about half a dozen of them, all titled women, all in it up to their necks, the delicious things.'

'A common gaming house. That's good. What else?'

'Nothing, except that the beak said that if it happened again

he'd give them all a good whipping and clap them in the pillory! The pillory!

Yates, one of the best amateur jockeys of his day, looked up from his pipe. 'It's the end of an epoch, my dear Foster, that's what it is. Even the gentry can't gamble in their own homes now, the town's becoming so cursedly respectable. All the quacks and the Methodists are up in arms. They're determined to stop gaming. Of all the impudence.'

Foster kicked a log in the blazing fire. 'Mind you, these women have been asking for trouble for months. Everybody's been talking about them.'

Sanders nodded. 'The joke of it is that the queen of the lot has escaped without a murmur.'

'You mean Doris Merry?' Foster asked.

'Exactly. She's as smart as she's handsome. She's bought out three common informers to my certain knowledge.'

Yates put his spoke in. 'The latest gossip about Merry is that she's gaming as a business, if you please. She's running that bank of hers in partnership with some fishmonger fellow — you know, the lad with that hell in King-street. The young fellow who handles commissions for you.'

Foster looked surprised. 'You mean Crockford? She's his partner? Surely not.'

'That's it. Crockford. He's the partner all right.'

Foster rose. The meal was ready and the baron of beef smelt good. 'If I was old Merry I'd feel worried,' he chortled. 'From what I know of that young man I'd be frightened he'd become the sleeping partner.'

Chuckling hugely at his own wit he led the way into supper.

Despite his success as a gaming hell owner, Crockford continued to occupy his place as a minor member of the racing fraternity. Steadily he was acquiring more and more information, and selling it more profitably. Details of important training gallops reached him just as soon as they could be coached up the roads to London.

He had ways and means of testing the betting market and he came to know how this jockey and that was putting his money. He learned as much as he could about what the other big owners were doing and he was able to pass all this on to Colonel Foster, whose racing coups were in the main as successful as his hazard play was unlucky.

Gradually, too, Crockford got to know the bookmakers. There were not many, for most gambling was done direct between owners and stables. The modern idea of a bookmaker who would form a market in the bets and accept commissions from all comers, hoping to make a profit by balancing his figures, was only just coming into prominence; and as yet the men accepting general commissions were very few.

Crockford took note of all this, and did much thinking. From his earliest glimpses of a racecourse he had been amazed at the way the English crowds milled and shouted at matches between animals in which they had no direct interest. At the meetings, invariably, the poor man's gambling was done in the cock pits and on the rows of hazard tables spread out in the shops. Betting on other people's horses was unusual in the extreme.

After much thought Crockford decided to help change all this. If people wanted to gamble they could have no more spectacular, no finer medium, than the English thoroughbred. Such gambling could be an outlet to local patriotism and to one's judgment of a horse — a subject on which any Englishman must naturally flatter himself. If gaming on horses could become popular the hells themselves would be of no importance. And already one or two men in places like the 'Tun' were starting to make books. Crockford watched, studied, betted, collected information — and plunged.

Accordingly his daily programme changed somewhat. He no longer spent his evenings between his two gaming houses. Instead he went to the 'Tun', sat at the same table, and made a book. Before long he and a dozen others were dictating the market. Before many months were out he was the single most successful

gambler of the new commission men. Colonel Foster heard of it, laughed and gave him his wagers, which Crockford would stand himself or distribute round the market which he made with the other books, as he thought fit. It was new, it required quick figuring, it had the zest of a perpetual battle of wits, and he was good at it. Swiftly, his operations widened. The people from his gaming clubs made ready clients; he had touts in all the likely streets. He bet with the nobility, he bet with the rabble. He started offering wildly fanciful odds against naming the winners of some future double. He offered ten thousand to one against naming first, second, and third in the Derby and the Oaks, in the right order. It was amazing how many people would be attracted by the glitter of the odds. Before long people in the clubs were saying that Crockford and the new clique of betting men were actually having an effect on the sales of tickets in the public lotteries, so great was the turnover in this new fad for gambling on other people's horses. Unknown to him, Crockford was changing the whole pattern of English life for generations to come. Had anyone pointed this out he would have grinned cynically and regretted the number of unborn chickens whom he would never live to pluck.

At the height of the new fever, at a time when he was far too busy at the 'Tun' and on the racecourse to attend his gaming clubs more than once a week, he received a message. It intrigued and excited him, and for some minutes he speculated on its possible meaning.

Then he sent a reply and made his arrangements.

On the night concerned he ignored the 'Tun'. Luckily, there was little business, for the racing season was over, for men in London were not interested in gambling on distant hunting meets. He reached Ranelagh in good time. The place was rather quiet compared with the grand days of summer, for it was out of season, but the place was slowly filling up and he had a feeling that quite a number of the more discreet boxes were being prepared for occupation. A band was starting to play this new-

fangled Viennese music, and there was an air of rising gaiety about the resort.

Crockford was shown into a box. It was the essence of discretion; a dining-room, and a small ante-room which promised exceedingly. From the dining table there was a glimpse, through ornamental foliage, of the big floor beyond. But not more than a glimpse. From either side the party would be safely shielded by a high ornamental wall. Crockford was still in his early twenties, and all this was new to him. He alone, of the urchins with whom he had grown up in Temple Bar, could contemplate an intrigue with a titled woman in a *salle privée* at Ranelagh. It was good; it was an achievement. He could be proud of himself.

'This will do, waiter,' he said coldly, as though he had been in a room like this a hundred times, and had ample standards of comparison. 'There will be a lady. Tall, and masked. She will ask for Mister Foster. Show her in here. And you might see that the curtains are drawn.'

'Very good, Sir.' The waiter bowed. There was always a lady. As often as not she was tall. She was always alone and you would be out of your job in five minutes if you forgot to see that the curtains were drawn.

Crockford sat down and waited. He had dressed carefully. He was studying his personal appearance much more these days. He had even thought of going to one of these fashionable saw-bones fellows who would fix him with gold teeth, but the operation was said to be exceedingly painful and he shirked it. The secret of his appearance, he had realised, was that he should never look like a racing tout, but rather like a gentleman's servant. Quiet, modest; going in for blacks rather more than he would normally want to. If he started dressing like the Colonel he would be dismissed as an impudent pup who had ideas above his station. By dressing more respectably and more carefully than any of his own kind he lifted himself just that much out of the rut. Yes, he thought smugly, he was playing his cards

as carefully as ever. And before the night was out he would have treated himself to an entirely new sensation.

The door opened. A woman with a mask entered. He detected a smile behind the disguise.

'Do you always call yourself Mister Foster when you have a rendezvous?' she asked as she sat down.

'It makes things simpler,' he answered. 'Will you have some Alsatian cup?'

"
'There's another thing I want to know.' The mask moved as its wearer studied every wall of the room. 'Do you invariably suggest that you meet ladies in a place like this?'

'That also makes things simpler,' he said with directness.

'I see.' She smiled. He took a good look at her. She was generously built, in her middle thirties, dressed in the most advanced fashion of the day. Her gown was wide swept to the ground; her corsage drawn in tightly; her shoulders bare and the line of the dress so low that her breasts were bare to within an inch of her nipples. Into the silver brocade of the gown were let panels of some shimmering blue stuff and its colour matched her wig which went down low over her back. As she moved she rustled and she filled the room with perfume. She carried a fan, like the women of fashion of her day, and she used it knowingly. Crockford had seen women like this in the distance; he had never imagined himself entertaining any but this one. The thought that she had dressed like this for the evening flattered him. He was aware that he was only an hour or two away from realising another ambition. It was a pleasant feeling.

'You didn't say whether you'd have some Alsatian cup.'

'As it's the first — and the last — time we will ever meet at Ranelagh the answer's yes.'

'Here we are.' He handed her the glass. They drank. 'Won't you take your mask off?'

'Later perhaps. What a very direct young man you are. You're very cold and you're very ruthless in some ways — and just a

boy in others. It must be a very successful combination, particularly with women.'

'Not with the women who matter.'

'I wonder. Tell me, what made you suggest that we met in a place like this when you answered my note? You didn't even know why I wanted to see you.'

'I worked it out. I thought, and I thought, and I thought. Then I made up my mind why you wanted to see me. And I felt, somehow, that it would be the right place.'

'And why do I want to see you, since you've got it all worked out?'

'Because you're breaking up the partnership. That's it, isn't it?'

'That's right.'

'I thought as much. There's a public outcry against gambling. The informers are busy and it's harder than usual to buy them off.' He grinned. 'It's all right for the likes of me — but it isn't respectable for a woman of title to be connected with a gambling hell. So that's why you're packing up.'

'Precisely. You have argued it all out.'

'All right. We've both made a very handsome profit. I've no complaints. I'm perfectly satisfied to call it off.'

She pulled a slip of paper from the top of her corsage. 'I wanted to give you this.'

Crockford inspected the draft. 'Why pay me five hundred pounds? You don't owe me anything.'

'I prefer it that way. I started off in your debt. Now we're square.'

'As you like.' He sipped his drink. The Viennese music seemed to belong to a different world. He sensed that he was very near his capture.

She put a hand on his arm. 'Now you can tell me why you suggested we should meet here.'

'It's quite easy,' he said, and his voice was gruff. 'While we were working together it had to be business, see? But the moment

I worked out that you were winding up our partnership then it becomes different.'

'Does it, indeed?' She nodded. 'Perhaps it does. But this could have happened two years ago, that night when I first saw you in King-street. Such things happen. You can't account for them. The moment I saw you something told me it would have to end up this way. Did you feel like that?'

'I don't quite follow you,' he said awkwardly. 'All I know about the first time I saw you is that I took one look at you and decided I must have you, however long it took me.'

She took her mask off. There was a beauty patch on her left cheek bone to show off her eyes, which were grey and very fine. Her lips were red and her teeth even; she had a face of great strength and dignity. Assuredly she was a woman who knew what she wanted. She looked at him coolly; he was very young and she was a woman of much wisdom.

'So you brought me here to rape me?' she asked softly. And before she could protest she was in his arms and he was kissing her with an ardour which was not unexpected and a knowledge which was. Within moments he was exploring her corsage with his lips and no victory was more easily won. 'Not here, my dear,' she said quickly, putting her hand to his face. 'Not here. It's too dangerous.'

'Does that matter?'

'Of course it does.' She freed herself. 'I know just the place. Pay off the waiter and get a coach.'

She took him to the Piazza in Covent Garden, to the back entrance of a house only two doors away from the one with the green shutters. It was a house where they did these things well, and they had supper by candlelight before retiring. This was new; this was vital. She had had many lovers, and none of them had kept her from the hazard tables for very long. Something now told her that gambling would be taking a minor place in her life for some time to come; still, it would make a convenient excuse with her husband, for nights away from home. Poor decrepit

wretch, he expected her to stay out by now. Gratefully, she abandoned herself to the ardours of William Crockford. She quickly realised that whatever his background he had little to learn about women. As a lover he was a new experience.

What she did not know was that Crockford, in his heart, was not just making love to a new and beautiful woman. He was getting level with a society which had dubbed him Fishmonger. But this was a subtle and very masculine thing, and Lady Merry, although she was no fool, would not have understood it. She was not made that way. Instead, she relaxed like a tired surf bather and let the tide flow over her.

A late autumn sun rose over a silvered London; light ice crisped and crackled as the first tradesmen went afoot. The watchman's breath turned to vapour as he called the hours across at St. Paul's Church. An east wind stirred dirt in the gutters and blew coldly from the distant estuary; coaches made a great clatter as they moved out along the nearby Strand. In Covent Garden itself all but two people were asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TO be a successful gambler was not enough. It was necessary to be the most successful of all gamblers. There were times in his daydreams when Crockford saw himself relieving the entire nobility of England of its available cash. Always, as he left the 'Tun' in the early hours of the morning and made his round of his gaming houses, of which he now had four, he blessed the streak which had made him gamester. Nothing but gaming could have brought him such riches; such power; such a phenomenal rise from Temple Bar to St. James's. Nothing but gaming could have given him a living in a world where the passions and emotions were always near the surface, where the heart raced at the toss of a coin, and the pulses tingled to the trickle of the roulette ball. Gaming was a drug and a disease, according to the Methodists. To him it was a tonic — and the means of earning extraordinary wealth.

Nightly, too, as he toured his parish and looked in at the games in progress at his various establishments, he wondered how he could prevent his men cheating while his back was turned. They were taking good pickings, Gye and the rest, and although he kept them down by employing a system of espionage and counter-espionage, it was obvious that all the winnings did not find their way back to the house. However, he argued, it was better to get most of the profits on four hells than to get the whole of them from one. That was elementary: Gye and company could put their hand in the till providing they continued to make him rich.

By now, however, his outgoings were heavy. Not only did he run the clubs, for whose premises he was made to pay what he felt were exorbitant rents, but he needed to employ bankers and croupiers for his tables, waiters for the service of his clients, cooks

to provide his liberal table, linkmen to see the coaches safely off at night — for a club without its linkmen was an admission that it was not catering for the nobility — touts and bonnets to attract wealthy provincial money on a visit to the capital, agents who made it their business to scrutinise the way his croupiers were operating, counter-agents who appeared as players and checked up on the agents, an unscrupulous lawyer who was for ever getting him out of trouble with witnesses and common informers, and a personal bodyguard to watch his safety now that he had become a gambler of position and a man who carried a large bag of sovereigns. And all this was only to look after his gaming-house interests; his bookmaking and racing side meant a new set of people. He employed two clerks to represent him at the 'Tun' and around the sporting taverns; they took his bets when he was not present and operated for him in the betting market. Then he now had a man working exclusively for him at Newmarket, sending him the latest information from the stables and the practice gallops: he had agents, too, at Epsom and Doncaster and the other big sporting centres, men who would be glad to slip him news of a likely scratching in return for a sovereign or two, men who would be the first to let him know if some favourite animal went off its food. In addition to these Crockford occasionally too news from various ruffians whose records were appalling and whose probable ending was on the gallows: these exchanges were intermittent and often preceded strange results. Crockford himself would never appear at the meeting or be in any way connected with it. But inquiries would go out, probably from one of Crockford's touts; the query would be answered, and money would change hands. Perhaps it happened that as a result of all this some much fancied horse ran far below form; if so, the book was the gainer, but in all this Crockford was quite innocent, of course. This side of his activities he never mentioned to Colonel Foster or any of his other wealthy connections. It would never do to let them know that he might be able to help them fix something.

In this way Crockford's personal retinue naturally expanded. In his house in Half Moon-street he had installed a housekeeper who was plump and elderly enough to offer no temptation, a cook, and a man servant, for whom he proudly took out his licence. He lived simply, but his table was a good one. He was aware that in his private life he could best succeed by simulating modesty and humility; he dressed appropriately. His wealth had already taken him far beyond the society of Temple Bar, but his lack of breeding must keep him out of any but business contact with the gentry. Yet it happened that a man of quality would often call at Half Moon-street and discuss an important commission in a room which Crockford had carefully furnished as a library. And when the business was over the gentleman would depart; the room would have made a favourable impression; the caller would have marvelled at the quiet success of this spectacular young gambler whose name was becoming notorious in the public prints and who was being lampooned by the Methodists. But it would never have occurred to the gentleman concerned to go beyond the library and sit down to dinner in the small dining-room.

Indeed, there was only one member of that class of society who had ever dined at Crockford's house. That was Doris, Countess of Merry, who dined there frequently on her way to bed. The town, which was a great whispering gallery where matters of this sort were concerned, knew all about the intrigue and chortled accordingly. Doris was the most outrageous, the most determined woman. Many men had wanted her and a number had been successful. She had married an immensely wealthy old cuckold, and her intrigues and her insatiable passion for gambling had become a by-word. She had been scathingly criticised in the prints after she had been fined for running a gaming house; the magistrate had threatened her with a whipping if it happened again. This choice 'tit-bit was fair game for the wits of the town and a skilfully drawn lampoon showing beauty being birched was in great demand in the coffee houses. Now,

with her association with this gambling man, her two passions could be assuaged most conveniently, and it was generally argued by the fops of the day that the house in Half Moon-street was the scene of some of the most delectable dicing in the whole of London. Whether that was so or not, it is a fact that for the first time for many years she was happy: previously men, because of her beauty, put her on a pedestal and appeared to worship her. Crockford instead flung her across a bed and within an hour was back at his seat in the Tun Tavern, fidgeting a point or two of odds in his own favour. His success with the woman was due to the fact that he was quite indifferent to her.

It was typical of his methods that when he suddenly received a call to Colonel Foster's mansion in Bayswater he first went to elaborate lengths to bring himself up to date on the delicate question of that distinguished sportsman's credit. Crockford, who had once boasted that he knew the face of every gamester in London, now realised that knowing a face was not enough. It was more important to know the strength of a man with his bankers. So in the investigation of credit Crockford now knew no equal. He paid good money to clerks for the right information and it would have horrified the big merchant bankers down in Lombard-street to know that he had informants in every office. Of late he had issued his men with strict instructions about the amount of credit he was to allow the various players. Nothing was committed to paper, but a code covered every possible contingency, and a croupier in doubt could quickly send a message to Gye who would at once reveal the extent of the player's credit.

In this way Crockford had built up a ruthless and an expert system. A gambler was squeezed to the cracking point, but no more. It was bad business to try and force blood from a stone, particularly when a miracle might happen and the victim might recover some of his losses.

So before trailing out to Bayswater to see the man whose patronage had done so much to set him on the road to success, Crockford called in the aid of his paid reporters. In a day he had

all the information he wanted; the gallant Colonel, who had received what had been described as a final advance of fifty thousand pounds about three years ago, had only last week been refused further accommodation by his bankers.

Crockford felt quietly confident when he was shown into the library at Bayswater. It was long after dark; the thick curtains were drawn; an open fire crackled on the hearth; the candles flickered, for a high wind was blowing across the fields outside. Foster was dressed, but without his wig. He offered his man some sherry, a drink for which there was at the time a vogue. They took a goblet each and drank gratefully, for the night was cold. On Foster's part he enjoyed these meetings. They occurred only once or twice a year, and some important racing coup was discussed and planned. Usually it succeeded. But apart from the gain, the meeting itself was stimulating. He enjoyed talking to this restrained volcano of a fellow, this man who measured every respectful word he said, but who could yet conquer the leading courtesan of fashionable London. It was a long time now since he had seen the youngster's possibilities, and he congratulated himself on the way he had added to London's gallery of queer characters. The man had rewarded him by starting an intrigue which was the talk of the clubs. It was amusing; it was even gratifying.

'You're doing very well, Crockford, from what I hear,' he found himself saying with a smile. 'Very well. Each time I see you I realise how you can report progress. You've come a long way from the fish slab. A very long way according to the gossips. I take it that your intrigue with the Countess of Merry is still progressing favourably?'

Crockford hesitated. He had not learned the art of talking in banter. At this sort of thing he became tongue-tied and surly.

'I don't understand you, Sir,' he said.

'Come now. You surely must. At any rate, you understand Doris. They tell me that the dear thing has never looked so radiant. She's so preoccupied these days that she's even given up faro.'

'That won't do her any harm, Sir. She always lost at it.'

'You should complain about people losing,' Foster finished his goblet and poured himself another. He realised that there was no change to be had from the subject. 'Well, to business. You know that I wouldn't have sent for you unless I'd something special to discuss. I'm interested in the Houghton Stakes at Newmarket in April. I'll have a horse named Talon in it. He's never run as a two-year-old and it will be his first time out. As far as I know we'll have about seven or eight against him, including one of my own named Forest which has quite good form. With any luck he ought to be the Outsider of the field. Understand?'

'And you want to back him to beat Forest and all?'

'Exactly.'

There was a long pause. 'Colonel Foster,' Crockford said cautiously. 'What sort of price were you hoping for?'

'Up to twenty to one.'

'That might be possible. And how much are you thinking of putting on it?'

'Ten thousand sovereigns.'

Crockford put his glass down. His brain was working at speed. At the moment, as he knew, the man could not put down ten thousand pence, and whatever you might say of Foster and his kind at least they didn't normally back horses for money which they could not settle.

'That is a vast sum of money, Sir,' he said softly, but he was only talking to gain time. 'How can you put that much on the horse without bringing the price down? It would knock the market sideways. Ten thousand pounds — why, it would start at about ten to one on.'

'Not if you handle it for me, Crockford.'

'Let me get this clear, Sir.' He was still thinking ahead of his words. 'You want this to be a really big coup, at the longest odds possible.'

'Naturally. I'm not proposing such a bet for fun.'

Crockford looked straight at his man. 'Are you going to give

me this money in advance, to spread round the market?' He knew the answer before it came.

'I wasn't proposing to. Not unless it was absolutely necessary. I thought that you'd got this market business so organised that your own word would cover the bets until the normal settling day after the race.'

So he proposed letting Crockford cover bets for a fortune, knowing that he could barely settle if they lost. Oddly enough, the young man did not feel angry. Instead he felt sorry for Foster; whatever his faults he would not have made such a proposal unless he had been on his last rattles of the dice box. If the gamble went wrong he would probably pay up — somehow. But it would mean the end of Bayswater and elegance.

He sipped his second drink. 'Colonel Foster, Sir, if I'm to spread ten thousand pounds around the market I'll have to be very certain that the horse is going to win.'

'You can be sure of that,' Foster said quietly. 'I take it you'd agree that Forest would be an outstanding horse in any such race. Well, I can assure you that Talon has him beaten by four lengths. As far as I can tell the chief outside opposition is likely to be Parmesan, owned by Sir James Lodger. Well, Forest is half a dozen lengths the better on its last showing.'

'How sure are you about this new horse being all that much better than Forest, Sir?'

'Private gallops.'

This time the pause was a long one. Crockford decided to take the plunge.

'Colonel Foster,' he said quietly. 'I don't have to tell you how good my information system is. You've been buying it for years. So you'll understand what I mean when I tell you that according to my informants there's no record of any horse named Talon being owned by you, and so it's never had a private trial against Forest.'

The logs crackled in the fire. A coaching horn sounded dully from the distant Bayswater Road, which the stages used on their run in from Uxbridge.

'I bought Talon this week,' said Foster quietly. 'He was registered with Tattersalls this morning. He will wear my colours at Newmarket in the Houghton — my second colours, of course.'

Crockford nodded. 'And you already know that this horse is lengths better than the animal which was a leading two-year-old last year.'

'I have proof of it.'

Crockford went straight to the point. 'Are you sure this horse is a three-year-old, Sir?'

Foster flushed. He hesitated. A year ago Crockford would never have dared to ask such a question. Two years ago he would have horsewhipped the man for such an innuendo.

'Talon,' he said shortly, 'has never raced on the English turf. I have imported him from France with the idea of eventually putting him to stud.'

'What was his two-year-old form like in France?'

'He only ran once, very unimportantly. He did not train too easily in his first season.'

Crockford had inferred enough. 'Does it happen that he's rather well developed for a three-year-old?'

'Yes, you could say that,' Foster answered, and it might have been that he sounded grateful for the formula. 'You certainly could say that he was a big fellow.'

Crockford nodded. He now knew where he was. 'Excellent, Sir. We may certainly hope to spring a surprise on the market. Very well. First of all I shall find out exactly what the rest of the field will look like. Then I shall start making a big book backing Forest heavily.'

'Forest?'

'Of course. You must naturally back your own favourite. I shall probably spread what will appear to be well-informed money and information about Parmesan. It will look like a two-horse race. Knowing Sir James Lodger, he will take the chance to back his own colours for a big killing. Then when we have the market nicely shaped I will start spreading money for Talon as

though you were merely covering your second string as a precaution. I don't say we can get twenty to one. We may to start off with. But we'll get a very good price. Then your winnings will be clear profit except for your losses on Talon. They'll be small in comparison — although you will probably have backed it for anything up to twenty thousand by the time I have finished.'

'Twenty thousand?' Foster looked startled. 'For Heaven's sake be careful. Ten thousand on the new horse, twenty on the favourite.'

'If you're setting yourself a clear two hundred thousand profit you'll need to put more than ten on Talon. Don't worry, Sir, leave it to me.'

'But my dear fellow — suppose something goes wrong — we'd be cleaned out.'

'I had already thought of that, Sir. I suggest you leave everything to me.'

There was a long silence.

'This will be the greatest coup ever, if it comes off,' Foster said quietly.

'It will indeed, Sir.'

'And I don't mind telling you that it will be a disaster if it doesn't.'

'I wouldn't worry too much on that score.'

'All right. I'll expect you to let me know how things progress.' He took a drink. 'Now meanwhile there's a couple of other things. First of all, if you can spare the time from your romantic assignations, I want you to go and see a young man named John Gully for me. You've never heard of him. He's in the King's Bench Prison — for debt.'

'You want me to visit him?'

'I want you to report what happens when somebody else visits him — our old friend Henry Pearce, the Game Chicken.'

'The champion? What does he want with a gaol bird?'

'I think he chiefly wants an opponent. He has had only two fights in nearly two years, for there's nobody to stand up to him. He's

desperate to find somebody — and I hear that he's found this Bristol boy in prison.'

'Bristol men are good.'

'They certainly are. Now I don't have to tell a young man of your worldly wisdom the fact that while a prisoner is unfortunately cut off from the world the world is anything but cut off from the prisoner. That is one of the niceties of our emancipated prison system. So it comes about, as you undoubtedly know, that if you want to spend an amusing afternoon watching the wenches being flogged in Newgate a shilling or two will always secure you a comfortable window seat. And similarly, if you're the Game Chicken and you think there's a youngster who may be a match for you, there's nothing to prevent you going along next Thursday afternoon — I understand that's the time arranged — and having a spar with the exhibition gloves.'

'Thank you, Sir. I'll be there.'

'My presence, you understand, might upset the betting market. You can go much more surreptitiously. Now another thing.' He hesitated. 'I'd like you to do me a personal favour.'

'Anything that's in my power, you know that.'

'I'm — I'm interested in a young woman who's developed a most deplorable passion for gaming. It's also a very expensive one, for she gambles very badly and has lost far more of my money than I can afford. It also happens, by one of those coincidences, that while my interest in the young woman is still very real, it chances to have changed somewhat from the position of a few months ago when our relationship was somewhat different, if you follow me.'

'Perfectly, Sir.'

'So I was wondering, Crockford, whether, in view of the fact that she would normally seem to be a very attractive young person, you would consider giving her employment in one of these gaming houses of yours. You might well find that she would be an excellent worker at that sort of thing. This would also have the advantage of putting her on her own feet, as it were, of re-

moving her altogether from my sphere. Truth to tell, I have at the moment neither the time nor the inclination to continue the original association.'

Crockford shrugged. 'We're continually taking people on. Sometimes they stay with us; as often as not they just vanish after a few days. Don't forget, Sir, that when all the money is drained out of it I'm just a gambler, always one move ahead of the police. So I can't offer your lady anything very solid. But if she cares to come and see me I'll look after her — just as long as she cares to work properly. And if that's any help to you, Sir, you're more than welcome.'

'Thank you, Crockford, thank you very much. I'll tell her to come and see you.'

'Certainly, Sir. What's her name, by the way?'

'Amy. Amy Verdun. Funny thing. You've never actually met her, but you've seen her. Funny. How small the world is. Why, she was the young woman in the Piazza in Covent Garden — the one you kept under observation for me some few years ago.'

'I remember, Sir.' Crockford finished his drink and prepared to depart. It will be a pleasure to look after her, Sir, I assure you.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE King's Bench Prison was situated over in Southwark, that area on the south bank of the Thames which had once housed the notorious Clink, and still housed the Marshalsea. It was a scrambling, ungainly part of the town, a hotchpotch of breweries and fair grounds, prisons and cock pits, glass works and theatres; a raffish place, with its gaming shops, its squelching slums and its sudden glints of elegance; a busy place, wafted over by conflicting smells; a place where tradesmen died comfortably off.

The King's Bench was in many ways its most remarkable feature, for this was indeed the model prison of its day. While the criminals languished in gangrene and gaol fever in Newgate and Bridewell, the King's Bench was a place with its own standards, where anything could be bought providing only that the prisoner had the money to pay for it.

Spread over a large area, it consisted chiefly of one vast building, but within its grounds were a coffee house and two taverns, while its principal walk had become a thriving street, an avenue of stalls where the incarcerated could purchase almost anything they wished. Its walls, it is true, were thirty feet high, but a simple system of local 'rules' enabled the man with money to buy himself the liberty of the surrounding district, so that he could have the run of an area three miles in circumference. The rates were fixed, and simple; for five guineas a man could purchase this goodly measure of freedom — providing his original debts were small. A man who had been sent to gaol for a sum of one hundred pounds could buy the same freedom for eight guineas, and every subsequent hundred cost him another four. Poorer debtors, unable to afford such liberties, could buy according to the 'day rules', which gave them three days of comparative

liberty in every term — at slightly more than four shillings a day.

True, there was another side. There was overcrowding and damnable food — for any poor wretch who could not pay his way above it. There was bullying, and there would be occasional flashes of fiendish and senseless cruelty. Regulations were either a dead letter, or they were enforced with sudden screaming violence. Sometimes an example was made; in the main the prisoners had little or nothing to fear except from their own numbers, for they had a lynch law of their own. The marshal, whose name was Jones, mostly lived away from the prison, and the turnkeys knew their trade. There were worse places in London, and many a man of position succeeded in living there on the 'rules' with his family.

On the Thursday afternoon William Crockford plodded across London Bridge to the Borough Road. It was raining and the roads were heavy to the tread. He was wet through and was regretting that he had not taken a chair. But Crockford, except when women were about, was frugal. He also had an instinct which told him that he belonged to the sidewalks and not to the sedans. He could afford a chair, but it was better not to take one. Especially when you were going to the King's Bench on a mission for Colonel Foster.

He walked round to the south of the building, rang a bell, explained his business, and passed a coin to the turnkey. Within a minute he was walking through what appeared to be a public market. Rain dripped from the covers over the stalls; rain made pools and puddles on the grass and the walks; rain streamed into open drains and cesspools; rain stained down the fronts of the shops and down the outer walls of the prison itself; rain sent prisoners to the scant comfort of the gaol or to the more comfortable apartment houses that were inside the 'rules'. Rain drove relentlessly across London, sending the beau to his club, the scrivener to his stool and the actor to his coffee house.

Five minutes later Crockford studied Henry Pearce, the

Game Chicken, Champion of England, then unchallenged in his supremacy. At the same time, too, he saw young John Gully, a mere fledgling of twenty. The Chicken's was a name that resounded throughout England; Gully was an unknown, another useless debtor languishing in the King's Bench. All eyes wherever he went, followed the champion of champions. The Chicken's day had been short; but it had been brilliant. He had fought only four times and his face was little marked. The pulse beat faster when the champion was in the company. Already he was a prince among men. If this was his power at 26, the fancy was saying, there would be no knowing his genius by the time he was in his prime at forty, and full of fighting wisdom. With a champion such as Pearce in the land, great days were indeed in store for the prize ring. But his battles had been few, for there was none to come out and take a whipping.

It was while looking for an opponent that the Chicken had heard of Gully, whose sparring bouts in the King's Bench were being rumoured around the taverns patronised by the fancy. A trial bout was the easiest thing in the world to arrange; the gloves were handy and a square was roped not far from the King's Bench chapel. The rain poured down relentlessly, driven sometimes almost horizontally by the strong sou-westerly wind. There were fewer than a dozen onlookers, all seemingly prisoners willing to risk a soaking in return for something to look at. One of them, indistinguishable from the rest, was Crockford.

Perhaps it lasted fifteen minutes. It was hard to say. Time dragged, when the rain was trickling down a man's neck and his feet were cold as ice. As Crockford watched, his mind went back to a day in his boyhood in Covent Garden, when he had stood with old Broughton and heard the thud and snort as Tom Johnson, the corn porter, had shown his paces against some local lout. This time the noise and the pattern were the same; only the science was more in evidence. The gloves were quickly greasy in the wet and the puddled earth was treacherous. Steam rose off the men's bodies as they sparred and wrestled, glistening with

sweat and water. Their breathing was loud and deep and regular, punctuated by a snort as a man spewed a fleck of blood from his gums; the footwork was slow and heavy, as it was bound to be in such conditions; the thud and grunt of glove into body came fitfully as they paused or spurted in their change of tactics. The scene was grey with driving rain. Crockford shivered. Another spy, on business the same as Crockford's, huddled in a handy doorway and cursed the weather. .

When it was over and the fighters were towelling themselves down, several men who studiously did not know each other were hastening back to town over London Bridge.

Word went round the sporting taverns before the night was out. Gully's debts were to be paid and he was to go into training to fight the champion. Gully, it was learned, was a Bristol boy, like the champion himself and like many a champion before him. He was young, still not 22, he had never had a fight, but he had the strength of any two men and he had stood up toe to toe with the Game Chicken in their practice bout.

Mellish and Craven, two of the town's leading gamblers, would be backing the Chicken for 600 guineas to 400, it was learned. Fletcher Reed, the Scottish sportsman who had estates out at Shepperton, and who had ordered a spy's report on the bout, was accommodating all comers; his money was ready behind Gully at the right price.

Colonel Foster and Crockford met in the house in Bayswater. The Colonel listened to what his tout had to say.

'It's an extraordinary thing,' he said at length. 'Extraordinary. You are seriously trying to say that an unknown fledgling who has never had a fight in his life is capable of beating the Game Chicken?'

'It's simple, Sir. The Chicken is tired and out of condition. So he spends his time in the taverns. He isn't anything like as good as he was when he first beat Bourke. He crowded those last two fights. He beat Spray in March, and he beat Cart in April. Now, because there's nobody left for him to fight, they're pulling this

man Gully out of prison and there'll be a match by the middle of the summer. Take it from me, Sir. The Chicken's in no condition for three fights in so short a time. This new man is good, and he'll last out longer. Don't forget. He's twenty-two and untouched.'

'It's too young for a fighter.' Foster shook his head. 'I can't see the Chicken pulling this sort of card out of his cuff — and then losing to it.'

They argued. 'Very well,' said Foster at length. 'You saw the bout. You're entitled to your conclusions. I agree with you that by backing the unknown man we'll be getting the better end of the odds. You're proposing to back him yourself?'

'I'm putting two hundred sovereigns on him.'

'That's a lot of money, even for a successful hell keeper. What will you do if he loses?'

'I shall hate his guts,' said Crockford simply. And he did. For the next forty years. There were even times when that hatred seemed to be the mainspring in Crockford's life.

But much was to happen in the next few weeks. The fancy smelt a trap. A champion did not bring an unknown out of gaol and risk his title. Not unless it was on a certainty. A fortnight before the fight was due Gully joined Fletcher Reed's party and travelled out to Cricklewood, where Reed's negro Bill Richmond won the money against Holmes the coachman. The fancy looked at Gully with curiosity; young, heavy, powerful, and unmarked. A strange customer to be fighting for the title of all England. Gully disappeared back to his training camp at Virginia Water, the object of general speculation but little affection. In the main the fancy fidgeted, suspicious.

As the day grew nearer the taverns of London became a vast whispering gallery around which rumours ran like gorse fires in the summer heat. Where was the fight to be held? The question was asked urgently, of landlord and potman, of actor and whore; who was in the know? The town was seething with gossip and the magistrates were known to be in a bad temper. No sooner

was a venue mentioned than the word went round that the local bench would be waiting, ready with the militia, ready to make arrests. Prize fighting was illegal in topsy-turvy England, but the fact that a battle was forbidden only served to make it more exciting. Finally the signal passed with the utmost discretion from friend to friend; Virginia Water itself, where the challenger was encamped. The great Dan Mendoza would be waiting on horseback at the final crossroads to give word of the actual site of the ring.

And so all sporting London set off in motley caravanserais; a shouting, boisterous crowd, quick to laughter, quick to hot temper, making the dawn rattle with the clatter of the horses' hooves and the shrill of the coachmen's horns.

First it was Virginia Water; then it was Chobham. Then the fight was on; then it was off. First one day disappointed; then another. Magistrates were on the prowl; the rival camps were bickering over the odds, each side suspecting a trap at this most unusual of matches. The fancy fretted, returned to London, and made many a fruitless journey. But all the while its appetite was being whetted. What had seemed to be doubtful entertainment, tainted with high suspicion, became the most talked of fight of them all. From day to day the odds ebbed and flowed. Chertsey, the big gambler, who had started off with much money for the Chicken, was now openly covering all the bets he could get, this time backing Gully. Several efforts were made to get the fighters into the ring, while sensational rumour followed rumour; all this while Craven and Mellish, the Chicken's chief followers, were ready to lay six to five on their man, in hundreds.

At last the word went round again — the 'office' was at Hailsham, down in Sussex, and the date was Tuesday, October 8, 1805. Down from London poured every member of the fancy who had wit enough for the journey; they came by cart and they came on foot; they came on horseback and they came by coach; they wagered their way down the road, post to post, racing and ranting to the fight of fights. As they reached the Downs they

were joined by another great crowd which had set off north from Brighton, already a centre of fashion; and by yet another crowd, mostly humble farming folk, from Lewes.

At one o'clock, in a twenty-four-foot ring on the village green, Gully stripped off, with Tom Jones for his second and Dick Whale for his bottle holder. Within a minute the Chicken was in the ring, attended by Clark and Joe Ward. Great was the din as the final odds were shouted, the last frenzied bets staked before the clash; there was an autumn nip in the air and a wind was blowing, but the cheeks of the fancy, packed thousands strong, were hot with excitement.

Gully was nine pounds the heavier, but the Chicken had the science and the experience, and when, in the first round, Gully lunged hugely at his man, who side-stepped and felled him, the odds swung at once to three to one against the challenger. Then, for seventy minutes, the men pawed and battled in the ring, until the grass was greased with blood and sweat. For the first seven rounds the champion had it all his own way, stretching his man to the grass each time, until the odds were ten to two behind him. In the eighth they closed and wrestled, and both fell together, but Pearce stayed well ahead, levelling his man in the ninth, and easily winning the tenth and eleventh. In the twelfth Gully split the champion's lip with a mighty blow that chipped his knuckles, but in the thirteenth he was out-generalled and fell again. The next three rounds went Pearce's way, too, but it was noticeable that Gully was taking endless punishment and riding it. Pearce himself was getting short in the wind and wilder with his swings. In the seventeenth Gully played savagely on the champion's left eye, which was bleeding profusely, and the odds were down to six to four on the Chicken.

So it went on. There was a time, at about the twenty-fifth round, when Pearce seemed to have lost much of his blood and a little of his confidence. According to the odds it was now anybody's fight. But experience told, and by the fortieth round it was obvious that Pearce was on top. Gully's head had swollen; the

blood from his torn left ear streamed down his body; in the forty-fourth he was dropped with a most damaging blow to the throat, and from then to the end of the fight he pawed and rolled in the ring, unable to measure his man, holding on desperately. Not until the fifty-ninth round did he give in.

Hats flew into the air. The champion retained the bonnet, but a new star was born. The boy Gully might not be a match for the Chicken, but he was good enough to lick anyone else. In defeat, the youngster had made friends.

A fortnight after the fight Nelson was killed at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Less than five months later the Game Chicken beat Jem Belcher at Barnby Moor, near Doncaster, and it was agreed that Gully, who had stood up to the winner for so long, was certainly in the championship class.

Crockford saw both fights. He had lost his two hundred pounds on Gully, and he hated him for it. The loss occurred at a time when he found himself swindled by a conspiracy between two of his croupiers, and when he sustained a sharp loss following a betting coup in which he had stood at the losing end. Added to these irritations, the lady Merry had of late been exacting in her demands and irritable in their fulfilment. The woman, Crockford growled to himself, was no better than a common shrew. Life, in short, was losing its zest. Here he was, at thirty, short in the pocket again and no longer young.

And when Talon lost the Houghton stakes at Newmarket, despite the care with which he had planned the victory, Crockford was back where he had started.

He was fat; he was uncouth; he was raucous and blasphemous. He loved two things, lechery and money. Now, suddenly, he found himself tired of the one and void of the other.

CHAPTER NINE

AFTER Talon had been defeated at Newmarket, Crockford barely managed to settle his betting debts in the London taverns patronised by the fancy. He was solvent. But only just. He came through with scarcely a sovereign to spare, and even his four gaming hells, two off King-street, two near Jermyn-street, had to be sold to meet his position. They went to other members of the fancy, who were convinced that they could buy the bank and roll the dice as profitably as he had done. That was the advantage of a hell; it was like the Funds; an asset that could be quickly realised.

With the disappearance of his other assets went Doris, the Countess of Merry. To that very wise woman it was reasonable to take a lover who was as ugly as he was slovenly, and as low born as he was rapacious, provided always that he had a flash of wit and an appropriate ardbour. A lover who was dull and worried was useless. Doris, the lady of title, returned to her gaming, where fortunes varied but where people behaved more reliably.

In the months that followed several things happened. The Game Chicken again beat Jem Belcher, the one-eyed immortal who came out of his retirement for the fight. The battle was a desperate one, but Belcher went down, with his yellow colours dipped in sympathy at the passing of a master. Yet somehow the Chicken added little to his laurels in the victory. He roystered his way down to oblivion, disease and frivolity combining to rob him of his fighting powers. Within a few months the fancy was talking not of the sick Pearce, but of John Gully, the man who had had only one fight. For Pearce, barnstorming the country with exhibition bouts that served only to keep him going as excess and illness crept up on him, was now champion in title only.

It was obvious he could never defend himself in earnest. Belcher, a wearied veteran who would never admit defeat, fought Cribb, and Gully was in the old warrior's losing corner. There were almost as many eyes for the second as for the ex-champion.

At last, after two years, Bob Gregson of Lancashire came forward to challenge Gully, and the fancy murmured with delight, for here was the match to decide the title.

Meanwhile Crockford had had two years in which to patch up his fortunes.

The one thing he had kept during his reserve was his credit. Once lose that, and his career as a betting man was finished. So, with only small change left in his pocket, Crockford retreated in the betting market, while still appearing nightly at the 'Tun' and the other sporting taverns. His mind was as quick as ever, or even quicker. He was ready to take bets, providing that he knew where he could cover them with money that went the opposite way. In this manner he succeeded in keeping up appearances. The legs knew that he had been hard hit when the Talon coup had come undone. But they never knew that he was left with less than the price of a week's lodging. So as the months ticked by, and Newmarket gave way to Doncaster, Crockford marked his bets, and the fancy assumed that he was back where he was, one of the leading men in the market.

He had been ruthlessly and glitteringly successful; he had fallen down, solely because he had been outsmarted in planning a coup. He had made the elementary mistake of assuming that nobody else connected with the race was prepared to be as far-sighted as he was. He had learned the lesson, at an expensive price.

Colonel Foster he had almost forgotten by now. The Colonel had paid up, to a penny, but his estate at Bayswater and his place near Hereford had gone with the settlement. Crockford's information service, built up so stealthily with touts at all the chief centres, was now neglected. He no longer had a patron who could afford such news.

Slowly, plunge by plunge, by a careful bet here, by hedging

there, by coming to a confidential arrangement at a cockfight, or by getting to know somebody who was in need of money over a certain minor race, Crockford climbed back, sovereign by sovereign. He had a long way to go, but he was making progress. It was a hard world, in which he had paid a high penalty for assuming a man's honesty; a bitterly competitive, unscrupulous world, where a poisoned racehorse or a forged entry offered fair game for a racing coup. For the rogue who was found out there was always the hangman's gibbet on the road out of Newmarket, and many a corpse had stiffened there in the hard east wind. For the rogue who was not found out there was St. James's, the freedom of the hells and the whore houses of the town. It was a fair bet. Everyone knew the hazard. For himself, Crockford continued his climb. And he made it the slow way, grubbing it in crowns and half-sovereigns, where before he had made it in neatly stacked chips that represented much bigger stakes.

In the middle of all this Crockford took a sudden decision. It was summer; he was now thirty-two; the fancy was talking of this promised match between Gully and Gregson; Epsom was over, and had obliged him with his first real coup since the Taion disaster. He shared the proceeds with the jockey but he still had enough left to feel that his fortunes had turned.

He decided to get married. He took the decision abruptly, as he took everything. The girl was Sarah, respectable daughter of a comfortable corn chandler in St. Mary-le-bone, one of those villages just outside London which were now being swallowed up in the gorge of the metropolis. She was in her twenties; she was chubby; she laughed quickly and she had a sense of humour; he had an idea that she was no virgin, but she did not greatly appeal to him in that fashion and he had not troubled to find out. It was not love that Crockford wanted from her; love was a commodity you could buy without much trouble; it was loyalty. He lived in a world where you could trust nobody, where you were always pitting your wits against the watch, the common

informer, or the magistrates. At the same time, you were for ever fighting your own kind. The battle went on without end. It was a small world, of greed and cheating, avarice and dirt; a world devoid of kindness or nobility, a world where you could make an accommodation but could never trust a friend. And as a man grew older, he could feel the cold iron of loneliness about his heart.

What Crockford needed was a partner, somebody who would be forever in his corner, backing him. There was a chance that a chubby daughter of a successful tradesman might fill the void.

He took the decision one day when they were out at Highbury, then one of the cheaper spas around the town. They had gone out on the coach from Moorgate, and she had watched him anxiously while he rolled the dice at a hazard table. Her upbringing made her disapprove of gambling, but she could not argue when he won.

'What number do you fancy this time?' Crockford asked her, picking up the dice.

'I'll say seven again. It won on the last table.'

'Ten sovereigns on seven,' Crockford murmured.

'You're playing high, Sir,' said the attendant respectfully. The house was used to silver money. This was much higher than he had bargained for. He decided to make the most of it. 'Ten sovereigns on a seven, ladies and gentlemen.' A crowd gathered round, purring its excitement at such wagering. The dice rattled and rolled, and Crockford picked up the winnings.

'You've brought me luck,' he said, as they moved off in the crowd.

'Aren't you giving him a chance to get his money back?'

'Of course not, my dear. That's the first rule of successful gambling. You never give anybody a second chance.'

'You're a funny one, I must say,' she murmured. 'Still, you certainly seem to be lucky.'

'Not always.' They threaded their way through the throng of holiday-makers. The summer afternoon was loud with the shouts

of cardsmen and thimble-riggers, with hawkers and beggars. The air was heavy with the sweaty press of people. 'You've brought me luck in the last week or two. Maybe I've always been a bit lucky, more often than not; but I've been twice as lucky since I met you. That's why we ought to get married.'

She giggled and her face was flushed. 'Well I must say,' she said eventually. 'That's a fine way to put it. What do you want — a wife or a pair of lucky dice?'

'I mean it, honest I do. Look here, Sarah. You and I understand one another. There's no nonsense about us. We've got a lot in common. Together — why there's nothing we couldn't do.'

'Are you serious?'

'Of course I'm serious. I'm not much of a catch, Sarah. I'm just a gambler, and not a very good one in the last year or two. I'm not much good, and I won't even promise to be faithful to you. But we need partners, people like you and me, Sarah.'

'You've a funny way of putting it, I must say, William. Aren't you supposed to start by telling me that you love me?'

Suddenly they were both laughing. He patted her arm. 'Let's talk about love some other time, my dear. As far as I'm concerned this is business, see? I need someone — we both do. Let's make it a partnership.'

She turned serious and looked at him steadily. They had entered a dairy and the place swarmed with flies.

'All right, William,' she said quietly. 'It's a partnership.'

CHAPTER TEN

CROCKFORD married in high summer. In early autumn he found himself in good heart, in improving fortune, and in adventurous mood. Sovereign by sovereign his luck continued on the rise. The dice fell right. He was no longer hedging all the bets he accepted at the 'Tun'. On the contrary; by using the utmost discrimination he was succeeding in carrying a number of them, and doing so successfully.

In September he paid a call that was to leave an important pattern in the texture of his life.

By this time the prize-fighter Gully was firmly established as landlord of the 'Plough', in Carey-street, not far from the very Temple Bar where Crockford had been brought up. Like Crockford, too, Gully had married — a pretty enough wench of the barmaid type, of the sort whom you saw often enough in the St. Giles' district to the north of the 'Plough'. The house, such being the fame of its landlord, was immediately popular, and was much used by the fancy when they had business inside the City proper.

By now, after his defeat at the hands of the Game Chicken, Gully was very much a character in sporting London. His one and only fight had paid his debts and his share of the gate money left him with more than £ 500 to his credit. He started a butcher's shop in Berners Street, for this had been his family trade down in Bristol; but he made little of it. He drifted into the racing world, went to the meetings, learned a bit about betting, and soon had his own coterie of admirers and hangers on among the lower dregs of the fancy. In all this he gave up butchering, in which there was little profit, and wisely took a tavern, where a man's popularity could be translated into simple terms of extra custom.

It was to the 'Plough', in Carey-street, that Crockford made his call. Before making it he spent part of the evening with his aged mother, still living in the bulk shop hard by Temple Bar: he cast through the primitive accounts of the small fish business, he advised her on a new man to run the buying and generally he played the part of the successful man who still had a proprietorial interest in the family business. Then, irritable as Temple Bar always made him with its smell of fish, he trudged north to Carey-street.

The 'Plough' was full. There was the thump of mugs on tables; the snatches of song; the guffaws of heavy drinking laughter; the stench of ale and men and sawdust; the smeary pattern of slops and puddles and steam which belonged to a wet night in a tavern in early autumn.

The town at this time was talking of the fight between Gully and Gregson to decide the championship. It was less than a month off, and Gully was out and about on his training rounds from early morning onwards. What more natural, then, that the fancy, back from the racecourse, should gather at the 'Plough' and toast the future champion, or swap a laugh or two with his cuddlesome wife? Of a truth, the fight was that rarity, one which was more talked about than betted on, for Gully had had only one public fight and Gregson, for all the romance that surrounded him, had so far only battered third-raters, with but few exceptions.

Born in Lancashire, Gregson was five years older than Gully, and at 29 was considered by the fancy to be more set in his ways as a fighter than a mere youngster of 24. Age, it was thought, was on his side. The fact that he was a bit of a poet, and a rank bad one at that, meant nothing, for the betting men had no time for literary nonsense. The fact, too, that he had once been an officer in the Army, that he had earlier captained a boat out of Liverpool, and that he was married into respectable mercantile society — all these things counted as nothing. They were oddities in a pugilists' background. They did not affect his punch.

What was more to the point was the legend that the two

men had met in a tavern coming back from the races only a month or two ago, had quarrelled, and scuffled. It was said that Gregson had picked up his man and thrown him to the ground. The fancy heard the story and was sceptical, as well it might be.

So although interest in the fight was high, the betting was hesitant, for this was a case of the unknown force meeting the little-tested object. On the whole, it was even money, either way, and as such the likes of Crockford saw little possibility of getting rich.

Hence his call at the 'Plough'.

They retired, after preliminaries, to a backroom, not before Crockford had looked questioningly at the landlord's wife, in whose glance he had detected promise.

Crockford eyed his man coldly. They had never previously spoken, yet, absurd as it might seem, Crockford was aware of an instinctive hostility to the fellow. In their different ways they were both competitors in the same field; they were both much talked about; one fought with fists, the other with figures. One was young, immensely strong, and not bad looking in his heavy way, except for the fading scars of his single battle; the other was podgy and as ugly as they could make them. The one had no scruples and was as lecherous as he could manage; the other, according to the tittle-tattle, was a high-falutin' fellow, who liked to talk of principles. Crockford had also suffered a sharp loss on Gully's fight. It was not just the loss itself but the time it happened which rankled. It occurred when his world was falling about him, and in some complicated way it seemed as though the rise of Gully was at the other end of a balance arm, compensating for and compelling the fall of Crockford. It was illogical, it was absurd; but that was the feeling.

Crockford grinned humourlessly at his own thoughts. He had the feeling that in the long run the man who made the bets came off better than the one who stood in the ring, swinging punches. He thought back to his youth, to Broughton and to Johnson. And he felt better.

'We can talk here,' Gully was saying. 'What do you want?' 'You know who I am?' Crockford asked.

'You're Crockford, the betting man. Have you come here with money for Gregson? If so I'll take as much as I can afford.'

'Not so fast.' Crockford shifted his gaze. 'It isn't as simple as that. I've come to suggest that you and I might do business together.'

'That's what I meant.'

Crockford went off on another tack. 'Look. This fight of yours has got all London talking. But it isn't easy talk. Nobody knows which way to bet. There's so little to go on. You've only had one fight. And although Gregson's beaten Berks he's not got a lot of form, not down in the south at any rate. See what I mean? It's even money you win. Even money you lose.'

Gully shook his head. He was a slow-speaking man. 'I can't help it if I've only fought once. There's been nobody to take me on. I'll tell you this. I'll beat Gregson all right. You can put your last farthing on that.'

'Maybe you will.' Crockford shrugged. 'Maybe you will. How much do you stand to get if you do beat him?'

'Stand to get? What, with the prize and the presents — and the bets . . . I'll say I'll make a thousand pounds.'

'It's a lot of money.'

'It's that all right.'

'I could make you two thousand richer if you promised *not* to beat him.'

'What do you mean?'

'Look, Gully. There could be real money in this game if you played your cards right. I've got rich connections. If they were sure you'd win they'd back you heavily. But they can't be sure. Don't you see? A man can never be sure of winning. But he can be sure of losing, if he wants to. Now if my people were sure you wouldn't beat Gregson they'd start backing him while it's still even money. That's what I'm saying, Gully. Win, and you smash your face up for a few hundreds, or may be a thousand.

Lose and you'll make twice as much. Look here, I'll give you five hundred sovereigns here and now if you agree.'

Gully was on his feet. The finger he raised in warning was shaking. Crockford was quite unprepared for such a reception, for he had never previously experienced anything like it. Among the fancy it was fair game to cheat; you tricked if you gained by it, and a prizefighter had no need to appear virtuous because it was never expected that he would be virtuous. He might be suspicious, he might fence, he might fidget for time in which to strike a better bargain; he might even barter elsewhere if the terms were higher. But the idea that he would not be open to a straight suggestion was simply unthinkable.

'You're a foul little sneak thief, Crockford,' Gully was saying, 'and I could throw you downstairs as soon as look at you. Get out.'

Crockford smiled. But he edged towards the door. 'Fine words, Gully. Fine words. But don't think you're so clever. While you're getting your face knocked in it'll be men like me who are making the money out of it. And don't forget when you're back in the King's Bench that you turned down two thousands pounds because you hadn't the brains to know better.'

Gully was round the table. 'Go on. Get out. I don't like the smell of fish around here.'

He only raised his arm in time to parry the blow of Crockford's stick, which came flaying down at him.

'No one says that to me,' Crockford was saying, his fangs showing in his uneven mouth. Then he gasped as he was spun round. Furniture went crashing; an oil lamp swayed drunkenly in the ceiling; the stick rolled wildly as it clattered across the floor.

Crockford picked himself up slowly at the foot of the stairs. His pulse was thumping and an eye was closing fast. His head felt the size of a pumpkin and there was a numbness around his temples. A tooth was loose and his mouth was salty as he lurched hurriedly to the door. His heart was full of hate.

Through a mist of tears and blood he looked into the night.

'All right, Gully,' he said hoarsely. 'All right. I don't forget.'

On October 14, 1807, John Gully fought the second of his three professional fights. It took place barely two years after his defeat by the Game Chicken, and the roads to Six Mile Bottom, so close to Newmarket Heath, were thick with traffic, while the muddy fields were trampled to paste under the press of people. The coaches clattered out down the main road from Newmarket itself and Norwich; they poured in from Cambridge, from Huntingdon, and north through Ely. They came up through Saffron Walden, through Long Melford, and across from Bury St. Edmunds. Never before had the meadow lands below the Heath seen such a crowd.

By common consent it was a magnificent fight, and a magnificent vehicle for an honest bet. The odds started at twenty to one on Gully, such was the sudden weight of southern money. But as the rounds passed and the blood clotted on the grass the betting men hedged and fretted. By the seventh round the vast strength of Gregson was more than countering the science of Gully, and by the eighth the tide turned against the London innkeeper. For Gregson suddenly caught him up, held him on high, and dashed him to the ground as though he were as light as a jockey. But Gregson, whether from chivalry or exhaustion never followed up. He could have jumped on his man, and knocked the daylight out of him. But he held back. The crowd, hysterical with excitement, yelled approval of his sportmanship, and for a second or two even the screams of the betting men were silenced in the loud, warm clamour of the sport.

The next few rounds were entirely Gregson, but by the eighteenth Gully fought back. His eye was closed; his temples battered; his face was puffed and torn; but his timing was that split second better, so that his punches were heavier and landed as their man was coming into them. Skill told more and more as the fighters weakened. Pawing, mauling, jabbing, buffeting, they swayed and rolled in the ring, treacherous with slime and blood.

By the twenty-fifth round both men were so exhausted they could scarcely rise from their second's knees, and they saw their bottle holders through the pink mists of men who were spent. Yet they were pushed forward from their corners and the fight went on.

The thirty-sixth round was the last. Both men were so far gone that a knock down seemed out of the question. They fell against each other as they mauled, like drunkards clinging to the nearest post. Incapable of standing steady, they swung feebly with either fist. Both were scarcely recognisable and neither had the strength to think clearly. At last Gully, the younger, summoned some final resource, pummelled ponderously into his man, his blows unchallenged. Gregson did not so much fall down as subside to rest; he was finished. It had been the bloodiest, most exhausting, most desperate fight in the lifetime of the fancy.

Gully, with the sudden strength that comes of victory, managed to jump out of the ring. But of the two he was perhaps the more severely mauled. He was able just to reach his patron's carriage, where he laid for some hours. His left arm was useless; his face like raw meat. Indeed, in a sudden apprehension that he might not recover, Gregson was brought to the carriage and the two spent men shook hands.

The crowds slowly dispersed, back up north through Ely, through Cambridge, through Huntingdon; off to the east through Norwich or Bury; back on the way to London through Saffron. The warriors themselves stayed on in Newmarket, headquarters of the fancy, and showed themselves on the Heath the next day, the admiration of all admirers.

Colonel Foster's coach was nearing Epping, when it was caught by a single rider. Crockford was making his own way back from the fight after a night spent in earnest talk with some local betting men. They stopped at the 'Cock' and ate mutton chops. Both had been out on the road since before dawn and they were ravenous.

The Colonel was in some ways a lucky man to be in a coach at all. His fortunes had crashed back with the defeat of Talon,

and for a time he had gone into premature retirement. But the unexpected death of a maternal aunt, whose estate had been vastly more sizeable than anyone could have expected, had put him back in funds. He returned from the crisis, not as wealthy as of old, but wealthy enough to resume his passion for horses and dice.

'You were a fool, my boy,' the Colonel said warmly, for he had had a good win. 'You must have had quite a knock. You should have done what I told you and backed the champion.'

Crockford threw a chop bone at the landlord's dog. 'What a champion, Colonel, what a champion. He's only had two fights in his life. He lost the first, and he looks like a lobster after the second. Yet they call him a champion!'

Foster grinned. The fancy was well-informed on these matters. 'You're losing your feel for the reins, Crockford. Just because he thrashed you you shouldn't let it upset your judgment. You shouldn't have bet against him.'

Crockford picked up another chop. 'Listen, Colonel Foster. I backed against him because I like backing against him. I'll always back against him. That goes for this year, next year, and as long as he likes to keep getting his thick head knocked about in the ring. I've lost my money, yes. But the pleasure of seeing him spit his teeth out made it well worth while.'

'Anyone would think you didn't like him. Weren't you on the losing side of a private fight with him a month or two back?'

'Perhaps I was.' Crockford spat a piece of gristle at the dog. 'But all fights don't take place in the ring. And they aren't always settled in the way you'd think. And on the things that really matter I'll always have the last punch with Mister Gully.' The grin broadened. 'As a matter of fact, Colonel, I'm winning one little fight with him right now. But he's too much of a fool even to know about it.' He thumped his mug down. 'I must get on.'

Some hours later Crockford was in Haymarket. The night was cool, but not cold. Flares hissed from the shops and stalls. The

streets were full of noise and movement. The chairmen were busy.

Crockford was tired and hungry. And his pocket was emptier for his visit to Six Mile Bottom.

'You're sure these are the best flowers you have?' he asked suspiciously, for he knew nothing of flowers and cared less.

'By far the best, Sir. You wouldn't find better in all London.'

He paid grudgingly but the thought of coming victory warmed his heart.

'Take these flowers to the 'Plough' at Carey-street,' he ordered to a chairman, 'They're for the lady of the house. Say — say they're from an admirer.' To be young; to be thirty-two; to desire; to know conquest; and to play. Those were the things that mattered. The blood stirred easily. 'No. On second thoughts — take me there instead.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE dice continued to fall well for William Crockford. The sporting world was dominated by the deeds of such men as Robert Barclay Allardice, known as Captain Barclay, and backer of John Gully; by Lord Foley, by Sir Frank Standish, for both of whom Richard Prince trained at Newmarket; at a different level by the likes of Dan Dawson the horse stealer, the last man to be hanged in public on Castle Hill at Cambridge; at yet another by the Bland brothers, the betting men who were to rise to be competitors to Gully and Crockford; by George Osbaldeston, the Squire, who was rooked of a fortune; by Colonel Mellish, the gamester who was to lose £40,000 on one throw of the dice; by Jerry Cloves, who had once been a valet and who now handled some of the largest and most questionable commissions; by the lame Crutch Robinson; by the high and the low, the gentry with their stables and their training strings; the horse thieves and the vagabonds; by the very Prince himself.

In the world at large the Napoleonic wars frittered away the very substance from the nations; Napoleon routed the Russians at Friedland. Ambition ran high. At home the sides changed over in Westminster, but it was a game played by gentry for the gentry only. To the people of the stews of London the wars meant only poverty and the press gangs.

Near Christmas Gully and Gregson agreed to meet for the second time. But it was months before they were in the ring together. The fight attracted enormous attention, from magistrates who were determined to stop it, and from the fancy, who were prepared to drive to the ends of the kingdom to see it. Finally, on May 18, 1808, the fighters met in Hertfordshire, after wild rumours had brought two vast cavalcades of carriages head-on in the roads near Woburn. Never was there such ex-

citement, such confusion, such a press of gigs, tandems and carriages. Gregson led one procession, sitting up proudly in Lord Barrymore's barouche, and on the long final run from Ashley Common to the park of Sir John Sebright carriage after carriage trailed behind or broke down; yet so determined was the sporting fraternity to see the match that men paid a guinea a mile for a lift, leaving their broken vehicles and exhausted horses behind on the road.

The fight itself lasted twenty-eight rounds and was all Gully. After Six Mile Bottom it was an anti-climax. The champion outclassed his man, and although inevitably severely bruised he was able after the victory to throw a contemptuous challenge to anyone else at the ringside. There were no takers.

Within two days John Gully, model of the modest professional fighter, was back at the 'Plough' in his white apron; his eyes black and his face swollen; his spirits high, and his customers delighted with their champion.

One man had not troubled to go careering over the countryside after the fight. That was William Crockford. He was too busy, on a little matter for which the 'Plough' itself was the setting; a matter of a buxom matron. Life was good, and desire flowed easily. So Crockford prospered, playing hard, swearing hard, and eating heavily. He was coarse; he was blasphemous. His ugliness was so marked that it became an asset. He walked with a limp, the result of some accident in boyhood; his hands, with which he pawed the air in argument over bet or bed, were pale and podgy, except where they were grey with dirt. Some of his teeth had gold fillings, which had been fitted painfully. And it was as though there was a memory of that pain in his grin, which was seldom humorous. Except for drink, he indulged himself, his fingers ever quick to board or breast.

Soon after Gully's third and last prizefight Crockford had recovered enough money to buy an interest in a hell in St. James's, with Gye once more as croupier in chief. And it was again as a hell owner that Crockford's peculiar gifts blossomed; he was

discreet; he had a mind that remembered figures and details; he knew to a sovereign how much credit to allow his customers; once more he started to build up his elaborate information system from inside the city counting houses; he became an authority on other people's affairs; he paid for information from both bank and bedroom; and above all his passion for food gave his house a style of its own. He would put on a better ordinary than you would get at White's — and give it away to his players. He would pay for the best wines, which he seldom drank, but he would spend much time in his kitchen, watching the preparation of the night's supper. He would give to the appearance of the cold meats the same care as he would give to the studied rolling of the dice — for if an ordinary man ran against you it was useful to keep in reserve a dexterity which could be depended upon to turn the tide, providing you were a wise man and used it frugally. Only a fool would bring it out too often; in that way lay the stocks and the gibbet. But using your throw just once in a while meant riches.

The small hell in St. James's prospered rapidly, and within a month or two Crockford had acquired another — this one in King-street, only a hundred yards away. His world was now orderly and compact; he travelled between the two gaming rooms, and he went east to the 'Tun' in Jermyn-street. Between striking bets in the one, and winning at hazard in the other, his fortunes rolled back uninterrupted.

Yet he was but one of many. There were hundreds of hells, from the open-fronted thimble shops of Fleet-street to the elegant gaming rooms of White's itself. They came, they went, their owners with them, rising on easy victory, falling from the attacks of common informers, blackmailers, or frenzied victims. The world gambled, and London was the dicing counter of the world.

Even so, there were too many hells, and particularly too many bad ones. The money changed hands easily, but little stuck to the palms of the thimble-riggers, themselves battered on by shrewder rascals. For a man to rise and lionise it over

the gamblers, whether the owners or the players, took courage, ruthlessness and utter determination. Crockford was just such a man.

Soon after Gully had left London on an exhibition tour, having announced his retirement from the championship, Crockford faced an evening which he sensed would be critical in his affairs. He had climbed back fast; once again he was spoken of enviously in the 'Tun'; once more his rooms were crowded. But he was at best lord of the second-raters. The really big players, the men like the late Charles James Fox, who had died only a year or so ago, had still not tilted at his tables. True, they were betting with him in Newmarket, but betting was different; a man stood to lose occasionally. What Crockford needed, he realised, was the patronage of a really important gambler, a man whose very presence would make his rooms the talk of the clubs.

On this particular night, as he dressed carefully before going out, Crockford realised that his chance for a decisive coup was at hand. Only a few months earlier he had taken a small house, number 50, St. James's, only a door or two away from the home of that dead sailor fellow Nelson. It was a pleasant place, and wife Sarah ran it very sensibly. Life was good, particularly as a little matter at the 'Plough' had now been successfully concluded and a complication with a waitress at the 'Tun' had been overcome after meeting the extortionate demands of a Jermyn-street apothecary. Furthermore, there was a promising rendezvous at Vauxhall tomorrow with a barrister's wife; the woman had been gaming heavily and was in debt. At times it was amusing to acquire by threat favours which you could get just as easily by stealth; it made a change.

'You look more like an actor from Drury Lane than a dice player from St. James's-street,' his wife said. She remained, despite her marriage, the daughter of a St. Mary-le-bone tradesman; she accepted her husband but made no attempt to understand him.

Crockford fiddled with his lace cuffs. Not too long, just sufficiently modest. He would have liked to have indulged a riotous

taste in clothes, to have preened it with the beaux of clubland. His instinct for a successful coup counselled him to continue to be cautious. The gentry might owe him money; they still preferred to regard him as beneath them. So Crockford had advanced only to this extent; he now dressed like a respectful upper servant, preferring sound black cloth, with a touch of good white in the linen.

'An important meeting,' he explained shortly.

She stared; suspicion was never far away. 'Another woman?' she asked.

He grinned. 'Of course not, Sarah.'

'It usually is, anyway.'

'Don't get bad tempered about it,' he said smoothly. 'You remember our bargain. I told you I was a bad number on a roulette wheel, and I didn't even promise to be faithful to you. On the whole I've surprised myself. I haven't been half as bad as I expected.' He was feeling pleased with the world, his brain quiet, his senses placid, as an experienced fighter might feel when waiting on his second's knee, determined that no excitement would start eating up his energy.

'And if it isn't a woman, might I ask what it is?'

'Sarah, it's something far more important than any woman. It's the biggest gamble of my life.'

'Again?'

'Yes, again. We're getting better company every night along the road. When Gye and I started we had the small fry. We've been building up. We're increasing the bank every night. Mind you, we've been wise. We've arranged for one or two people to have some handsome wins.'

'Then you've been losing money.' She had two gods; virtue and frugality. It was her odd fortune to have married a son of neither.

'Don't be silly. The handsome wins were always made by paid dupes, who returned the money afterwards.' Crockford grinned.

'All except one, that is. He thought he would be clever. He tried to make off with it.'

'What happened?'

The man looked at her expressionlessly for a second. Then he shrugged. 'It doesn't matter.'

'I suppose you paid some thugs —'

'Forget it, Sarah. You don't understand these things. Anyway, it's all over now. It's forgotten. It's tonight I'm thinking about. We're standing by for the biggest killing of the lot — for the first of the big fish. Big fish. Funny. They like to call me the Fishmonger. All right, Sarah, I'll tell you. Until tonight I've been fishing for sprats, with just an occasional mackerel. Tonight I land the first of the salmon. Salmon, see? That's quite clever for the likes of me, isn't it?'

'What's his name?'

'Young Ball. Heard of him?'

'Of course. Isn't he one of the people at White's?'

'He certainly is. He's one of the heaviest of the really big players. And he's coming to attack our bank. With any luck he'll bring Lord Granville with him and we'll be made. We'll be made, my dear. If they win, we'll be poor, but all their rich friends will come rushing after us, hoping to skin us. And we'll beat them. We'll fleece them for every penny they've got — and quite a bit haven't got.' Crockford turned from the mirror, and helped himself to a glass of wine. He imposed a discipline in these matters; one glass before a big game. Never two. 'If he loses, my dear, he'll stay on and on in the hope of getting his money back. In either case it'll be the same in the end.' He raised his glass. 'Wish me good luck, Sarah. Funny, you know. I once sat up two days and two nights bankrupting a butcher at cribbage. It seemed like the end of the world, it was so important. But it was nothing — nothing, compared with tonight. So wish me luck, my dear, wish me luck.'

She folded her arms over her stomach, which was built for the purpose. She was a simple woman, whose mind could not disentangle the problems her husband set her. She had feelings which pulled against each other, and at the same time.

'I'm not sure that's necessary, William,' she managed to say, rather surprising herself.

Young Ball, who was years later to be known as Ball Hughes, the Golden Ball, had just left Eton, where he had been a friend of Gronow, the diarist. He was known to possess a little charm and a lot of expectations, and on leaving college his uncle Hughes, whose name he was later to add formally to his own, had bought him a commission in the 7th Hussars and set him up with a handsome allowance.

Uncle, oddly enough, was by profession an admiral. He had amassed a vast fortune, estimated to be worth the fantastic sum of forty thousands pounds a year, from his cavortings in the Indian Ocean. Why a man who had done so well from the Royal Navy should have elected to place his heir in the Army, is a fair subject for a guessing game. But the army was his choice, and into the army young Ball went.

And now, only a few months out of Eton, society was already talking of Ball. His Colonel was no less a figure than the Earl of Uxbridge, afterwards the Marquis of Anglesey, and the young man took the nobleman as his model for his coats, hats, boots and deportment. In every matter he followed his master, and he made his mark in society the quicker. He was handsome, he was gallant, he was amiable, and he had expectations of vast wealth.

So it was no wonder that already the gamesters were marvelling at the stories of his play. His passion for hazard, from which Crockford was to profit so richly in the years to come, was already weighing with him as seriously as his love of living. Crockford and his like were the more content.

To have members of parliament at your table was a privilege; to give spectacular ordinaries to some of the sporting squires from Newmarket was a naturally wise move; to entertain the minor nobility was all in the way of business; to have young Ball among your victims was an investment.

And tonight the fact that Ball was playing created an atmosphere

of its own among the gamblers at Crockford's table. Inevitably, there was a strong snobbery among the players; the man with the small coin would bow to the man who was playing big. To be a casual at Crockford's, or any of the St. James's-street places, was to be a nobody, to be nothing better than a penny-thrower in the stews of St. Giles. To be a regular conferred its own distinction; a man would expect his favourite position at the table, his favourite chair; could gorge himself of his favourite dishes. But to be a man from the clubs, looking in as it were at one of the humbler hells, was different; this was to be a privileged visitor.

And so it was natural that young Ball, the down still fresh on his chin, the gaming passion gleaming in his feverish eyes, should be given the place of honour, opposite the croupier and master of the house. When Ball called a big main the rest of the table would sit back, respectful, and leave it to the young officer and the master of the room.

'Faites vos jeux, gentlemen, faites vos jeux,' Crockford intoned, the dice rattling in the cannister.

Ball looked up, his fingers rapping on the cloth in front of him. He was very young, very eager, and as yet very amiable. He could enjoy condescending to a man with dirty finger nails, if a good bet was there to keep his interest from flagging.

'You speak the most damnable French, Crockford. For Heavens sake say it in English.'

'Very good, Sir.' Crockford nodded his head. He was pale, composed, and as unemotional as a waxworks. 'Very good. Please make your bets, gentlemen.'

'Seven's the main. That's better. Here we are.' Hughes pushed a pile of sovereigns forward. 'If I lose that lot I'm skinned for the night.'

'Seven it is.' Crockford surveyed the pile of sovereigns and rattled the dice with a short, economical switch of the wrist. The beginner rattled them until his breath came short; the old hand made it all look as simple as a mere twitch of an eyebrow. The dice rattled across the cloth. 'You throw out, Sir. You throw out.'

'So I do.' Ball took snuff. Brummell had made it the latest affectation. 'All right, Crockford. That's it. You're too lucky for me.'

Crockford leant forward slightly. 'I'll be glad to accommodate you at any time, Sir.'

Ball smiled. There was an irritating woman, who was anxious to mate him to her daughter. He had, unknown to her, anticipated the arrangement while avoiding the formalities of the altar. And tonight he had to pay penance, as it were, at her soiree. The thought was depressive, particularly as the daughter had shown herself to be shrewish. An hour or two longer at play would make the night seem shorter.

'Maybe it's a pity to finish so soon,' he said. 'It's quite early. So perhaps you'd let me have, say, a thousand pounds?'

Crockford nodded. 'I'd be happy to accommodate you for any amount you like to name, Sir.' He clapped his hands and sent instructions to a clerk, for although there was no clerk he liked to keep up appearances of this sort. I would be happy to accommodate you for any amount you care to name, Sir. It was the Sir which mattered. You fawned on them because they had been to Eton and had vast expectations. You cringed in front of them. They liked it that way. Well, it did you no harm. You always had the last word. You could fleece them. And when they couldn't pay you could enjoy yourself twisting their arms.

Crockford rose. He was a shrewd showman in these things.

'It's time the table had a change of luck, Sir. I'll leave you to my croupier Gye.' He turned to his man. 'Gye, carry on. And see that Mr. Ball and his friends have everything they want.' With a bow, he was out, playing the part of the superior servant to the final exit, with never a cuff out of place.

Ball stayed on and recovered most of his losses.

Not quite all, but most of them. This fact may have delighted Ball. It certainly never surprised Crockford, who accepted that Gye was a master of this sort of thing, and who had instructed him accordingly.

The young man left the table a few sovereigns the poorer, but the richer for some innocent hours spent in the company of honest gaming men. Crockford counted his gains with satisfaction. The future was promising indeed.

It was about a year later, and the time had arrived when Crockford had a man-servant, a pinch-faced consumptive named Milling. The man had narrowly escaped flogging and deportation for minor housebreaking, and only some Crockford money, passed on a whim, had saved him. In return, he served his master gratefully and so far honestly, and when Crockford had a job which needed doing, and which required a ruffian from the stews to do it, Milling was the man to find him the right rascal.

The relationship between master and man, indeed, was unusually complicated, for Crockford asked of him favours no man of station would have dared to expect from a servant, using him as go-between in any dealings he might have with receivers, as bearer of threatening messages, as procurer of satisfactory abortionists. Any ordinary man of affairs would have been frightened; he would have expected blackmail. Crockford thought one ahead; at the first sign of trouble he could turn the fellow over to the runners. The situation was neat, and typical of Crockford. And it worked.

On this particular evening Milling looked unusually unwell, and the sputum moved lumpily as he coughed. Crockford, who was sitting jacketless in front of the fire while passing an hour before going to the 'Tun', eyed the man with disapproval. At this rate, he thought realistically, he wouldn't be useful much longer. Then he would have to get another servant. There were many, but his requirements were specialised.

'Colonel Foster, Sir.'

Crockford put on his jacket. He looked quickly round the room; candles in good order. Everything tidy. The fire burning well. The draperies quiet but good. The furniture expensive but not too noticeably so. Yes, it passed. If only he could keep Sarah

out of her own kitchen he could live up to St. James's-street.
'Show him in.'

He waited, back to the fire. So Colonel the Honourable Charles Edward Sebastian Foster was calling on the Fishmonger. It was a good moment. It was one worth working for; one that lifted him clear of the rest of Temple Bar.

'Good evening, Colonel.' Crockford motioned to Milling, who produced Madeira. 'It must be nearly four months since I last saw you.'

'It is. Almost exactly.' Foster settled himself into a high-backed chair and glanced round the room. He made no comment. It was apparently as he expected.

'How did you find where I lived?'

Foster smiled. The elegant man of forty who had been Crockford's first patron was now more than sixty; deeply lined and gray. He walked badly and carried his years heavily on his shoulders. 'Don't be foolish, Crockford. You've become quite famous. Let me think, my friend. It seems like yesterday when you waylaid me outside my club. But I suppose it must be a full twenty years ago. You were the smelliest lout in the whole of London. It used to be 'Sir', with a bow and a touch of the forelock in those days. Now I'm in debt to you and it's 'Good evening Colonel.' Well, I suppose you've worked for it in your odd way.'

'Worked very hard for it, I assure you, Colonel.' Crockford noticed that Foster had lost weight. His cheeks were thin and his eyelids were baggy; he had a high colour and his hand trembled as he fumbled with his snuff box.

'There's a story going round the town that you've won fifty thousand from young Ball and Lord Granville. Is it true?'

Crockford smiled. 'Is that what they're saying? No, it's nonsense. I've had a few small wins. But nothing much.'

Foster looked at him keenly. 'Ball's a useful client, isn't he?'

'Ball? My dear Colonel, you know all about him as well as I do. He's vast expectations from his uncle, Admiral Hughes, and the old man won't see the year out. When Ball inherits

he'll take the man's name and he'll be the biggest catch in London.'

Foster smiled. 'For whom? For the gamblers, or the women?'

'I was thinking of the ladies, Colonel.' Crockford was wise to the conversation; he knew how to handle the answers. He was like a superior servant, seeing his betters from a standing position. He could talk in two styles; his own talk, which he reserved for his wife, his mistresses, his men, and his fellow legs, and his high tone talk, which he reserved for the gentry, his clients on racing heath or hazard table.

'Ball,' Crockford added gravely, as though discussing an interesting case, 'is a man who can't stop gambling. But he's often very lucky.'

'Then he must be the only one who is. He'll be a wonderful investment for you when he gets his inheritance.'

Crockford finished his Madeira. 'As it's you, Colonel, I'll say something I wouldn't say to anyone else. You're right.'

Foster grinned, and helped himself to another tumbler. 'That's better, boy. That's talk more like a man than a stuffed footman. Of course he'll be a godsend to you. You've got his patronage, and you'll skin him alive.'

'I certainly hope so. Now tell me. You didn't really come to talk about young Ball.'

'No, I didn't. I came to see you about my note. It's due next week.'

Crockford's attitude changed, just perceptibly. He crossed to his escritoire, a well turned French piece, of which he was proud. None of the urchins from the market with whom he had been brought up had ever seen one, let alone owned such stuff.

'How much is it for?' he asked, busy with his papers. They made a singular collection; already some very useful names were among them.

'Nine hundred.'

'Yes. Here it is.' Crockford examined the draft. Properly stamped and signed. Everything in order. Due in four days. He looked up. 'Well, Colonel, what about it?'

Foster studied the candlelight through his wine. 'I can't pay. That's all. I'm practically bankrupt. I expect you can hardly believe it, Crockford, after the way I've lived. After the horses, and the houses, and the little places which we don't talk about. Funny, you were even involved in that at one time. Well, there it is, my boy. You wouldn't believe it, but I can't raise another fifty guineas in Lombard-street.'

Crockford unlocked a drawer and took out what looked like a ledger. He enjoyed victory. 'You've forgotten that you used to pay me for information, Colonel,' he said. 'I always knew what was going on, didn't I? And I still do. Would you like some information about yourself? Last week you had three bills due, and asked for time to pay them. You saw your bankers the next day and were refused further credit. You started last Saturday to arrange to put your horses up to auction, and you'd have done the same with your houses except that they're no longer yours to sell. Oh, and here's another point. You have a small estate in Ireland which is mortgaged separately. And the mortgagee last week wrote to your bankers to advise them that they were realising on the property.'

Foster nodded. He betrayed no suggestion that he was surprised. 'You're as well informed as ever. Anything else?'

'Just this. You had five hundred guineas on Skelton to win at Newmarket last week. And it lost. You haven't settled yet.'

'That's true.'

Crockford closed the volume, and locked the drawer. 'That's the position, isn't it, Colonel?'

Foster nodded. 'A very impressive performance, Crockford. It shouldn't have surprised me. As far as you're concerned there's just a small bill. Less than a thousand guineas. Will you give me time on it?'

'Do you think time would help, Colonel?'

'It might.'

'I don't think so. There are no more expectations. There's nothing left to mortgage. There's the odd chance of a rich second

marriage, but that's backing an outsider. You've left it rather late, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'Anything else? You sound like Lombard-street.'

'And that still leaves a note, due next week, which you couldn't meet if you forgot all the others.' Crockford looked at the bill. Yes, everything in perfect order. 'Look, Foster,' he said slowly, 'I'll do something for you which I hate doing, because it shows I'm weak. It's something I wouldn't do for a living soul.' He tore the paper up and watched the pieces as they flamed in the fire. 'You started me in all this and in a way I'm grateful. There you are, Colonel. That's the end of your note. As for that bet on Skelton, well, I'll look after it. It's with the Bland brothers. I'll take it over.'

Foster raised his third tumbler. 'You mean you'll actually pay it?'

'Yes. You can forget it.'

Nine hundred — fourteen hundred . . . I don't understand. It's — it's damnably generous of you. Or is it? What's behind it? What do you want from me?'

Crockford kicked a log. 'It is generous of me, Colonel, and there's nothing behind it. I don't want anything from you. Yes, I do, I want one condition. That you never tell a soul about this — understand? Nobody.'

'Do you think I'm likely to admit that I've taken charity from—'

'From a fishmonger? No, I don't suppose you are. But I don't want people to know I'm soft-hearted. See? It doesn't do in a gambler. If they once thought I was easy, or sentimental, why they'd walk all over me. And I'm not soft. It's just because it's you. You started it all. But I can't afford to do this twice. Understand? So keep your mouth shut, will you?'

'I don't regard it as final, Crockford, but I'm damned grateful at the moment. I shan't forget.'

Crockford turned on his man. 'That's what you must do. Forget. If it once got round that I was prepared to let a man off his note I'd be ruined inside a year. You can't run dice tables

and be considerate. Understand? I can't afford to do this — with anyone but you. And I wouldn't. I wouldn't dare. I'm doing this because you started me. Not because I'm soft-hearted.'

Crockford paused. He had an instinctive sense of timing and knew when a speech should finish.

'Let's forget the whole thing,' he said shortly, reaching for the decanter. 'You helped me. I help you. You're the only one of your sort who doesn't call me a fishmonger. But they won't always, my friend. They won't always. I'm going a long way past any of them. You see.'

The wintry day was fresh and sunny, and the south-east wind blew strongly across the Heath. The rime had been replaced by heavy dew on the grass and by nightfall there would be the sort of frost that made a traveller grateful for the hearthside of the nearest inn.

Crockford, who sat a horse awkwardly, shifted in his saddle and set off back to Newmarket town at walking pace.

'Well, Sir, it's a beautiful house,' said his companion, a local bailiff. 'And less than a two-mile canter from the gallops. Why, it's almost in the centre of Newmarket.'

'It's not a bad house,' Crockford admitted grudgingly.

'And in the best part of the district, Sir. His Lordship considers it's an absolute bargain at eight hundred guineas, lock, stock and barrel.'

'It needs a lot of work on it,' Crockford replied. 'Tell his Lordship I'll give him five hundred and fifty.'

'Five hundred and fifty, Sir? I'm afraid not. I've power to act for His Lordship, but not at that figure.'

Crockford shrugged. The horse misinterpreted the movement on the rein and started to trot, a gait which the rider found peculiarly difficult. He slowed the beast with an effort. An experienced bargainer, he found it difficult to haggle on horseback.

'Five hundred and fifty, In guineas. Take it or leave it.'

It was a fine house. Quite an estate for a fishmonger. Even Sarah would be impressed by it.

His triumph was somewhat sullied by the news, a few months later, that John Gully had bought a house on the other side of the Heath.

If Crockford was the first of the legs to acquire the status of householder in the parish of Newmarket, Gully was the first of them to achieve a string of racehorses.

He started with Cardenio, a nag which did little or nothing, but which added a few guineas to the pockets of rivals like Crockford, who took a morose pleasure in knocking out the odds against the beast on the rare occasions when it ran.

Others were to follow — Truth, Rigmarole, Forfeit, Cock Robin and Brutus; a poor lot in the main, doubtful vehicles for a strong bet.

In the world outside great events changed the map of Europe. Napoleon made his last stand and the French were routed at Waterloo; the grumbles of reform were noisy in the meeting-places of England; the Corn Law of 1815 started the great rift between the upper and the merchant classes of the country. The authorities were already compelling taxpayers to put up large sums for the building of new churches in which, it seemed, they were less vitally interested than of old. Richard Carlisle was fighting his battles for the freedom of the British press. A vast iron suspension bridge started going up at Menai, the veritable wonder of the world. The battle of St. Peter's Fields was fought in Manchester and Peterloo went into history as the knock-out blow which dismissed the old Toryism as the clamour for Reform rose like smoke in the still air of autumn. Then, within a year, came the Cato Street conspiracy, and soon the town had its greatest gossip for many years with the trial of Queen Caroline for adultery. It was a titbit which delighted the coffee shops, and little else was talked about from June to November.

In all these mighty matters Crockford took no part and as little interest. He was busy on other fronts.

For by now bookmaking, in the modern sense, was becoming

an established business, its leader Crockford, his second and closest rival Gully, with such legs as the Bland brothers pulling up in the rear. Bets were few, on modern standards, but were large, and the gentry had tired of betting solely among themselves. For this was an unsatisfactory business. If everyone wanted to bet on the same animal there was necessarily no market. The likes of Crockford established the market; they created something new, something which started humbly and furtively but which with the passing years was to weave its pattern through the tapestry of society. It was the likes of Crockford who not only made a book for the entire sporting nobility, but who slowly widened the range of betting until it attracted the middle classes as well as the owners. If he was going west from Newmarket Crockford would stop overnight at Cambridge, and there lay the undergraduates attractive odds against some future double. His prices were astronomical, but well inside the odds, and he hardly ever had to pay out. The wealth accumulated, and the young man whose sovereign would be worth a thousand if he could name the winners of next year's Guineas, Derby and Oaks would shortly be attracted to wagering on more immediate problems. In such a way Crockford and a few men like him changed the betting habit of a nation. Although he did not then realise it, he was finishing the age of the gaming house as surely as he developed the day of the book.

And as the book grew larger the feud between Crockford and Gully became fiercer. They vied with each other for the patronage of the wealthiest clients; they fought it out over the odds, cutting each other's prices, and, in the case of Crockford at least, using his informants to ensure a successful balance at the settlement. They were opposites, they were instinctively hostile. Gully had been a popular hero; he was modest, with the restraint which comes with great strength. He was humble, never afraid to talk of his beginnings in Bristol, always outspokenly grateful to such men as Captain Barclay who had brought him forward to prosperity. The prize ring had taught him some chivalry, his early

poverty had taught him tolerance. He could be kindly and generous. Although he could drive as hard a bargain as any in the betting ring he was basically an upright soul. Crockford, on the other hand, resented any dispute over his title as peer of the betting men. He was quick to jealousy; petty, petulant, and bawdy; blasphemous and obscene in argument; ruthless in victory. He had started earlier than Gully; he was older. His was the first of the big books, and it remained the largest. He would plan a coup against rival or ally, indifferent to his victims, and contemptuous when they squealed. He remained the most important of the gamblers; his book determined the prices which brought the others to heel. Gully who was a likeable man, was attracting the larger number of influential clients; they felt they could trust him, and to some extent they found the ex-champion a worthy fellow, respectful and attentive. Crockford, who was as crafty as he was ugly, they could not trust. So as the years passed Gully was placing the more influential commissions, but it was Crockford to whom he went when he wanted the money absorbed. The pace was fast, but the older man kept his lead.

The fancy liked Gully; it feared Crockford. Both men were content that it should be so. The Prince placed his bets through the ex-prizefighter; Lord Jersey, Lord George Cavendish, the Duke of Grafton and Mr. Greville placed theirs through Crockford. The rivalry was intense.

The years 1818 and 1819 were ones in which Crockford, working furiously at his two parallel interests, made his position unassailable. For the trumpery sum of one hundred guineas he bought a new hell at 5, King-street, just off St. James's, from the Jew Levisne, whose affairs were going badly. And barely had the fastidious Watier failed with his ambitious club in Piccadilly than the Fishmonger took it over and proceeded to run it most successfully for three years. It was his first association with Ude, Watier's magical chef, whose suppers were the talk of clubland. The two men had gluttony as well as avarice in common; the combination was formidable. Crockford had long ago realised

that hells were hells, whether well run or cheaply. They started, they had their vogue, they reached their peak, they drifted down as the gamesters moved on for a change of scene. For a man to keep on succeeding with gaming houses he needed not one, but many; he needed to know when to buy, and when to sell; to get in and refurnish a house before it had drawn the really useful customers; to sell it just as soon as they felt tired of it.

No sooner was Watier's established and successful than Crockford opened an imitation of it at 81, St. James's Street.

His position was now unchallengeable. There was no one to touch him, and the common informers and the blackmailers were so many charges out of his profits. What he needed now was a few years in which to consolidate, to continue sucking the money in. His system of espionage, spying on the affairs of others in the city, and spying on his own people in his hells, was costly but profitable. He knew he was swindled by his croupiers when he was away at Doncaster; he knew he was even cheated by arrangement with his own spies; but he still knew that he held the final profits, and he quickly learned when to have one of his men beaten by footpads. The example always helped.

The new place in St. James's-street proved even more profitable than the Watier's on which it was copied. But Crockford did not own the whole of it; he had it on shares with two noblemen whose names he was careful never to divulge. The arrangement was typical of Crockford, for by accepting them as his partners in a well-conducted gaming house he was not only ensuring the patronage of their peers at his table, but was receiving the favour of their bets on the course. It helped both ways.

Then he developed another idea. He ordered one of the Wyatts to build him a pleasant little house up in St. Mary-le-bone, which still preserved something of a village air of its own, even though London was steadily engulfing it. He had everything of the highest standards; the equipment was lavish; the food was excellent. And the bloods could drive up from the clubs in a matter of minutes and take the pleasant summer air looking out over the fields

towards Kilburn. The place did well, and it was a convenient house in which to set up a young woman to whom he had taken a passing fancy.

In all these activities Crockford did not neglect his racing. He followed Gully into the business of buying a stud. He built up a string for himself at his home just across from Newmarket Heath. His early purchases, it was true, were mainly failures, for he had much to learn, but he did own Sultan, which came second in the Derby, and which was later to play a noble part in the history of British bloodstock.

But Crockford had no feeling for bloodstock, and before it went to stud he sold the animal.

Before that, however, he lost a heavy wager on the horse, for having run so well in the Derby it was made favourite for the St. Leger. At Epsom it had cost its owner many hundreds of pounds, and Crockford was hoping to show a profit by increasing his bets on the Leger. Those were days when information travelled slowly, and a shrewd operator could make money by paying for his own private news service. Crockford had discovered this long ago, and the stage coaches from the racing centres continued to bring him confidential news about gallops, training plans, and even riding commissions. The one thing which had never occurred to him was that news of his own horses should reach him with the same breakneck urgency. So when Sultan broke down in a morning gallop at Doncaster, less than three days before the great race, a number of the leading legs, including Gully, learned the details before the owner himself.

For once he was caught by his own methods. Gully and one or two racing men were still in London, leaving it as usual until the last minute to drive furiously up the North Road. And the moment they learned the news they were all for accommodating the Fishmonger. Bets which they had been refusing the previous week they were now happy to lay, and the odds against Sultan did not shorten.

For eight hours Crockford was in ignorance and during that time he increased his commitments heavily.

His information, sent off late, passed him on the North Road, and it was not until he reached Doncaster that he learned the bad news. In the betting room at the racecourse he attacked Gully in a white heat of hatred. His obscenities, learned in Billingsgate, were picturesque, and were vastly entertaining to the other legs. When Crockford cursed a man he generously included his antecedents, against whom he made a number of allegations, and to whom he attributed various gallant if unpleasant maladies; he upbraided the man's immediate family and his future descendants. Unimaginative in ordinary speech, his profanities were charged with metaphor and simile; his invention was considerable. When he cursed he cursed extravagantly, because ordinary words had lost their meaning.

Gully listened to it all rather as a master listens to an excited puppy. The hysteria mounted; the blasphemy was lurid; the sheer bestiality of the invective would have shocked more educated men. As he ranted Crockford's normally pale face became paler with hatred: his hands flayed the air. The man who so seldom displayed his feelings was completely uncontrolled. To have been beaten by Gully was to be expected, sometimes; to have been out-smarted by him was different. It was horrible; it was humiliating; it was insufferable. In all bets there was a loser, and when you lost you paid up and said nothing. That was business. But to be beaten by his own methods was to be reminded that he had rivals. And that was intolerable. So Crockford ranted while the legs chortled and Gully shrugged, amused. Not until the Fishmonger rashly admitted some of the pleasantries that had occurred between him and the prizefighter's first wife, did Gully lean forward and with two short jabs knock Crockford senseless.

It was the second and last time that they fought physically and again inevitably Gully was the victor.

The legs watched the scene, richly entertained; they saw a waiter pouring water over the prostrate Crockford, and they

went on about their business. He had asked for it; he had had it. There was no more to be said. The fancy roistered its way back to the centre of Doncaster pausing at the thimble-riggers and the hazard shops on the way; stopping as usual to make bet or rendezvous, accommodating a local sportsman here, an unsatisfied tradesman's wife there; a rollicking, whoring, colourful gang of seedy gentlemen and ambitious cut-throats.

One man stayed behind in the betting rooms. Gully waited while Crockford came round. 'There's no sense in this fighting,' he said slowly. 'No sense at all. To begin with, I'm bound to win. You're not made to be a fighter. And there's another reason. There's plenty of room for both of us, Crockford. Plenty of room. This sort of thing doesn't help either of us. If we had any sense we'd see if we couldn't work together.'

Crockford looked up from his couch. 'Work together? My way, or your way?'

'It wouldn't be necessary to work your way. We'd both do well enough. What happened just now isn't good for either of us.'

Crockford wiped his face. 'Afraid the Prince will think you're still a common prizefighter, I suppose? I tell you this much. As far as I'm concerned I'll always fight you. Always. And if your friends don't like it, so much the better. I'll say one thing. Maybe it would look better if we kept it to ourselves. Understand? From now on it's a private war.'

Gully shrugged. 'As you say. It's up to you.'

'When I think that I've lost seven thousand pounds on Sultan, all because you got the news quicker than I did . . .' Crockford blew blood into his kerchief. 'All right, Master Gully. It's a private quarrel. But I won't forget.'

Some months later Crockford was involved in a singular incident with a man named Grigson, who had once been a waiter at Watier's, and who had been sent about his business a week or so after Crockford took over.

The man called on him, not at St. James's, which would have

been natural, but at St. Mary-le-bone, which suggested that he already knew too much about the gamester's business. However, Milling, who was on duty, announced that the fellow was at the door, with important information for disposal. There was nothing to do but let him in. So Crockford smoothed himself out and temporarily forgot the purely personal matter with which he was at the time occupied; it concerned the successor to the young woman whom he had originally installed in the house.

'Good evening, Sir.' The man touched his forelock respectfully. He looked pinched, and smelt of drink. Gin. It was the usual story. They hung on, by an exchange of servility for gratuity, until suddenly they lost their place. Then they went down from the club or the St. James's hell, down through the stews to the hazard shops of Fleet-street and the south side. Usually they died young, from too much gin and not enough food.

'What do you want? You have information to sell me?' Crockford was on his guard. The man looked as though he could never discover information, except perhaps by accident.

'Things have changed since I was at Watier's. They tell me you now have the finest house in all Newmarket, Sir.' The fellow was cringing but vaguely threatening.

'Don't waste my time talking.' There was an eager young woman upstairs, half dressed and impatient, a red-headed young shrew who had the very devil in her. 'What did you come here for?'

The servant smiled. 'I came to talk about your new club at St. James's. They do say that it's the best place of it's sort in the whole of London.'

'What about it?'

'Well, Sir, you wouldn't want someone to turn common informer against it and risk getting it closed up, would you?'

'So that's your game —'

'Not my game, Sir. It's nothing to do with me. I'm just a club servant. I used to be proud to work at Watier's, Sir —'

'Who're you working for now?'

'Nobody right now, Sir.'

'So you're going to do a little common informing to make ends meet.'

'No, Sir. I assure you, Sir. It's not me. It's someone I heard of — a man I could stop, Sir, if you wanted me to.'

'Don't be stupid. I've bought out dozens like you. How much do you want?'

'The man I overheard, Sir — I think I could buy him out —'

'Stop talking nonsense. How much?'

'It's a very fine club, Mr. Crockford, Sir. It would be a pity if any information was laid against it and all those fine gentlemen were brought up in court.'

'How much, I said?'

'We could lay a charge against you, Sir, couldn't we?'

'Not while blackmail pays you better.'

'Blackmail's an evil word, Sir. I'm sure you don't really mean blackmail.'

'Don't let's argue about words. How much?'

'Five hundred guineas, Mr. Crockford.'

'Don't talk nonsense. I'll give you five pounds for your trouble and if you or anyone else lays a charge against me I'll have your brains knocked out. Understand?'

'Five pounds! That's not much, Mr. Crockford, Sir. It's nothing — against your profit. I'm not sure it's not a moral duty —'

Crockford took a pinch of snuff. There was a sound from upstairs. The young woman was growing irritated, as well she might. 'Look, Grigson, if you inform on me you'll be beaten up first, do you understand? Then I'll swear an affidavit to a magistrate that you found out about certain private things that were happening here and you came here to blackmail me. It'd be my word against yours and on your record you'd be lucky not to be sent to Australia. Understand?'

'Yes . . . Mr. Crockford.'

'I promised you five pounds. You can have it.' Crockford took some sovereigns from his pocket and flung them at the man, who scrambled for them. 'Now get out.'

He watched the door closed. Then he pulled on the service bell.

'Milling, follow that man in the black coat. He's an informer. Find out where he goes. Make sure you'll recognise him next time.'

'Do you want me to put anyone on to him, Sir?'

'Yes. Every now and then it pays to make an example. See he's beaten. Informers are bad for our business.'

The consumptive smiled. He delighted in the feeling of a physical power which he only possessed by purchase. 'It'll be a pleasure!'

'Get after him right away,' Crockford added. 'And put them on him tonight. Before he's had time to spend his five pounds. See I get it back, mind.'

And as Crockford climbed the stairs his eagerness was a high testimonial to a man of forty-five.

But if Crockford was indifferent to his success, and took it very much for granted, there was one member of his entourage who dreaded every winning coup. That was Sarah, his plump wife, who, between bearing him children, did her best to keep his insatiable ambition within bounds.

The two of them were remarkably ill-matched. Sarah was petty, small-minded and frugal, while Crockford was rapacious, open-handed and spectacular. He would hit a man between the eyes in a dispute over twopence, and then fling guineas into the gutter if it appealed to his vanity. Sarah was respectable, except in her marriage; Crockford was respectable in nothing else. Sarah was devout, and perpetually in fear of Hell fire when a blasphemy spurted from her husband's lips: Crockford was as obscene as they made them. Sarah was increasingly prim, Crockford increasingly prodigal. Sarah would blush at the thought of an exposed petticoat; Crockford would fumble, cackling, in a corsage, confident of additional favours to come.

As their sons approached adolescence Sarah surveyed her

strange world of easy opulence, sudden crisis, and raucous blasphemy.

'Why don't you give it up, William, why don't you give it up?'

'Why should I? I'm doing well enough, aren't I?'

'Maybe you are.' The daughter of the St. Mary-le-bone tradesman would never become conditioned to the role of gamester's wife. 'But your luck's bound to change. You're winning all the money in London now, they say, but I lay awake at night terrified when I think of it. It can't go on.'

'Can't it? I'm not so sure. It's easy enough. Listen, Sarah, don't you start worrying.'

'Worry. It's not worry. Don't you understand? It's something deeper than that. It's evil, William. It's evil. I'm frightened, William, I'm frightened.'

'You'd never make a player. Why should you be frightened? When I married you I said it was a gamble, didn't I? Well, you've done well enough out of it. You've a house in Newmarket, a house in St. James's, and another in St. Mary-le-bone —'

'Which I've never been allowed to see.'

'Only because I run a hazard bank there.'

She looked at him keenly. 'Is that the only reason, William?'

Crockford shook his head. He had been up nearly all the previous night in a game with young Ball Hughes; he was tired and irritable.

'No, it isn't the only reason. I keep Mary-le-bone for my own amusement, see? I never pretended to you I'd do otherwise, did I? You've no complaint.'

'No complaint, William? Is that all it means to you?' There were tears behind her eyes, and he felt irritated at her stupidity.

'That's it. Cry. Pretend I never told you. Make out that you expected a nice quiet little husband from Mary-le-bone High-street. Well, you didn't get one. You got what you asked for. A hazard player with a taste in women.' He smiled. 'You shouldn't complain, my dear. It could have been a lot worse.'

She turned to the door. Spring sunshine was coming through the windows; the sunset over Bayswater would really be very pretty.

‘I can’t help it, William,’ she said suddenly. ‘I’m frightened. But you wouldn’t understand. It’s no good talking about it.’

Crockford glanced at the clock. ‘I don’t know what you’re getting at, you silly woman. Get this into your head. You don’t have to be frightened. We’re on the lucky roll of the dice every throw, my dear.’

An hour later Crockford sat at his desk behind his gaming room at 53, St. James’s. He now owned four clubs, of which this was the least profitable. But it was his nerve-centre. It was here that he received his advices from training stables, his news about secret trials, riding commitments, and the like. It was here, too, that he received his information from the city and paid off his informants. Watier’s and number 80 up the road were now his principal money-spinners; King-street was nearly as profitable. This particular house had virtually had its day, and he was only waiting for a decent offer to dispose of it. But a man had to have a headquarters; he must have somewhere for his papers. So the room at the back of number 53 was his den; he liked to look in every evening just before six. By then his despatch from Epsom would have arrived, and his private advice from Newmarket would be due within the hour. Certain other touts, too, from more distant parts, knew that their information was all the more valuable if it reached the Fishmonger before he went to the ‘Tavern’ in the evening. So there was always the chance that a titbit would turn up by stage coach, unadvised but invaluable.

Tonight was no exception. Horace, a horse in which he knew one of Gully’s richest connections was interested, had gone badly in a stripped gallop with a selling plater over a mile at Newbury the previous morning. The information was of much value, for so far he had been reluctant to let Gully have anything but very tight odds against the beast.

He made his way to the 'Tun' with his mind warm with anticipation of a coup, particularly one against his old rival. Newbury was not one of the fashionable racing centres and few horses of note were in training there; it might well be that Gully would not have arranged express information for himself, especially as the chief horse in the place was one owned by his own connections. If this were so, then master Gully would be only too pleased to place lavish money on the animal, which, in view of its performance that morning, was hardly likely to win next week in good class company.

Gully was already at the 'Tun', sipping claret and surrounded as usual by his admirers. There was a stir when Crockford entered, as befitted the arrival of the greatest gambler of them all. And that stir was slightly heightened it seemed tonight, for this was one of those rare occasions when champion and challenger, when the Fishmonger and Gully, were meeting head on. The fancy knew their animosity, and the spectacle of the two key gamblers wrestling over the odds was one which appealed to them all.

'Are you still anxious to back that three-legged donkey of yours?' Crockford asked, with a fair imitation of cordiality.

'You mean Horace?'

'Of course. What did I offer you last week? Six to four? I tell you what. You can have two to one.'

'Nine to four,' wrangled Gully promptly.

'Nine to four in thousands?' Crockford asked.

'Or twice as much?' Gully countered, while the rest of the room was silent. It was true that bets, on modern standards, were few but high in those days. Even so, the spectacle of two nondescript men, one pale and ugly, the other massive and scarred, wrangling, betting away in thousands was enough to command respect, even in the 'Tun'.

'I'd like to have a nice bet with you, Mister Gully.'

'Then let's say twenty-seven to twelve,' Gully said promptly.

'It's a bet.' Crockford made a note. 'Wait a minute. Wait a minute. We must have this in writing.'

'Just as you like, Crockford.'

'I prefer it in writing from you, Gully.'

'Why? Don't you think I could honour it if I lost?'

'It's not that,' Crockford smiled, enjoying what he thought to be the rein hand. 'But I feel that twelve thousand's a lot of money for a worn-out prizefighter.'

'You mean the undefeated champion of England, don't you?'

'Is that how you put it?' Crockford laughed mirthlessly. 'I suppose it would sound better that way. Well, good-night, Gully. You'd better be careful what you spend. You'll be owing me twelve thousand by the end of next week.'

'Off to work, Crockford?'

'Off to win a little hard cash. Good-night.' And Crockford was away, heading to King-street and the first of his hells.

'He hates you enough already. He'll never forgive you if it wins,' one of Gully's followers said, looking at the closed door.

'It'll win all right.' Gully smiled, and returned to his glass. 'I'll let you into a secret. Last week he'd hardly lay a penny against it. Tonight he's prepared to spread thousands. The reason's simple; it did very badly in a stripped gallop at Newbury yesterday.'

'It did? Then why do you still want to back it?'

'Don't be silly. Crockford has his spies everywhere. We all know that. So we arranged the gallop specially for him.'

Up and down, up and down, went the luck. But mainly up. Sometimes a coup failed; sometimes a blow against him was misdirected, so that people who had planned to fleece Crockford found themselves paying out heavily.

He was either lucky or careful over the Horace affair, on which he stood to lose twenty-seven thousand pounds.

The horse lost, and Gully paid twelve thousand sovereigns on behalf of his connections.

It had been an unsatisfactory race; they were badly away, and Horace's jockey had ridden sluggishly. When he had a clear chance to get through on the inside, the knave had chosen to

take the horse round on the outside, so that he had crossed and been crossed, ending up boxed in a length from the winner. It was either rank bad judgment on the jockey's part — the sort of mistake a man can make in the excitement of the racing saddle — or it was a clever piece of knavery.

Gully's connections never quite made up their minds. But the trainer instructed the jockey at the end of a whip and directed that the rogue keep his distance from Newbury.

A few days later Crockford made him a handsome present, in London.

Up and down, up and down, went the luck. But mainly up. King-street had had its day, and number 53 was now a poor place. Even Watier's was past its best. The high-class clientele now gambled at 80, St. James's-street, where Crockford relieved them of their ready cash.

By now he was really famous, or rather infamous. The satirists mocked him in the prints, the moralists wrote lampoons against him, the editors of the sporting sheets criticised him jovially, anxious not to condone him but equally eager not to incur his wrath. He became a household word, as the saying was. The Fishmonger, as they dubbed him, was news wherever he went. If a betting coup came unstuck, there would be veiled references to his presence. When some horse thieves were hanged on Newmarket Heath his absence from the gibbet was commented on in scarcely veiled fashion. When a rogue was hanged for poisoning a favourite a popular versifier openly wondered whether the magistrates had found the right man. Touts at the Regent-street Quadrant blandly offered to take the curious into any of his gaming rooms. When the runners raided an establishment — usually after adequate warning had been given — the spectacle of the gentry capering happily over the housetops was greeted with raucous laughter from the mob, who would shout 'Bring out the Fishmonger', well aware that the one man who would never be apprehended was Crockford himself.

So it went on. The diarists mentioned him; the Methodists tried to lay information against him; the preaching men ranted; the moralists despaired. Crockford, secure behind a barrier of bribery, emerged unscathed. On Newmarket Heath he found it advisable to appear only with a bodyguard; for he carried much money on his person and had many enemies. When he prowled London late at night he did so safely, a thug following him in the shadows. His women were well paid to keep silent, and his secret retreats were known only to the likes of Gye.

Despite all these precautions, he would occasionally find himself in trouble, as some busybody reared up, impudent and daring. The whole town chortled one bright summer day in the early 1820's when a tobacconist in Piccadilly exhibited a pair of allegedly loaded dice in his shop window, and explained that they were a souvenir of a recent visit to Crockford's gaming house at 80, St. James's. Crockford himself, chasing home from Epsom, heard the news and cursed. That night the shop was rifled, the windows smashed, the contents burned. The dice were never seen again. And the allegations were not repeated.

When the Duke of Norfolk himself took a part in the criticism, however, Crockford was presented with a different problem.

The Duke, on the standards of his day, was a comparatively modest gambler. In an age in which the entire aristocracy seemed anxious to disgorge its fortune for the benefit of the legs of Newmarket, the Duke at least behaved with relative restraint.

This did not prevent him losing seventy thousand pounds in a six-hour sitting at Crockford's hell. News that His Grace was in the gaming party reached Crockford within a few minutes, and the master rushed to his own table, personally to survey the game. It was a tribute befitting the nobleman's position in London.

At the end the Duke shook his head and declined further credit.

'Thank you, Crockford. I've finished. I take it you would prefer a draft? Or would you rather come round to my house in the morning and be paid in sovereigns by my steward?'

'A draft will be in order, Your Grace.'

'A draft it shall be.' The Duke rose from the table. His face was lined and tired and his pulse was sluggish. 'You're a lucky man, Crockford,' he said slowly, with a trace of a smile. 'A very lucky man. You deserve your reputation. You must by now have impoverished half London society.'

'Not half, Your Grace.' Crockford helped him on with his coat. 'But I'm not without hope.'

'The devil you are.' Norfolk grinned. 'I'll come back for some more one day. Meanwhile, I'll just help myself to a present.' He walked back to the gaming table and picked up the pair of dice. 'I'll just take these as a souvenir of a run of luck. Bad luck. You don't mind, Crockford?'

'Honoured, Your Grace.'

'I feel quite attached to them, my dear fellow. Is my man ready? Fine. Well, good-night.'

The door closed behind him. Crockford reached for a bell and Gye appeared. The man was ashen in the tiredness of the morning.

'Everything all right?'

Crockford grinned. 'I've a cheque for seventy-thousand coming in the morning, so everything ought to be all right. Except that he helped himself to a keepsake. He's just walked out with the dice France was using.'

Gye, who had just eaten, stopped picking his teeth with his thumb nail. 'He's what?'

'You heard. They were all right weren't they?'

'No, they weren't.'

Crockford flared up. 'You fool. That wasn't necessary. 'Get them back, at once. He's tired. He's been playing since early evening. He wouldn't hear a thunderstorm when he falls asleep. It's easy.' He unlocked a drawer, took out a pair of dice. 'I leave it to you, Gye. You know his town house. Get Milling to pick the best man he can for the job.'

He rolled the dice on the desk top, noticing automatically that he threw seven.

'Just change them over. Exchange is no robbery.'

A debtor died, penniless, in the gloom of the Kings Bench Prison. It was a matter of no rarity and equal consequence.

William Crockford, who had his informants everywhere, heard the news too late to be of help to the fellow. Had he known only a few months earlier he could have saved the man for a better ending.

As it was, he took a sudden decision, and a messenger departed with sufficient money to strike a bargain and recover the body.

And so it came about that Colonel the Honourable Charles Edward Sebastian Foster was given Christian burial in a cemetery near the village of Norbury.

There was one mourner, William Crockford.

He watched the gravediggers thudding the clay, and his mind took him back over many years to nearly forgotten triumphs.

CHAPTER TWELVE

UP and down, up and down went the luck. But mainly up. In all the thrust and crisis of the gaming rooms Crockford was fortified by the unseen support of the resolute Sarah, the wife who, between the business of bearing him fourteen children, found time to curse his extravagance, his gaming, and his infidelities. Unable to understand him, she kept her part of the bargain by remaining loyal. The world has laws; her husband seemed above them. He was a rascal and he was lecherous, but he was her man. She followed him.

By 1823, by which time he was 48, it seemed that Crockford's reign of greed and luxury was drawing to a close. For the informants were busy as never before, and the public outcry against open gaming was loud in the journals of the day. It seemed as though Britain was ashamed of its social sores; the reformers everywhere were clamouring for drastic laws, and still more drastic application. For the first time Crockford was aware that his personal situation was changing. Instead of the Fishmonger spying on society, enjoying the power which his bought information gave him, he realised that society was now spying on him. Two of his own men had been bought over and were known to have made elaborate and damning depositions against him; and now an inconsequential fellow named Orme had laid a public information against his King-street club, the long legal documents containing a minute report of a system of marked money which Crockford had for some time used in the house. There was nothing underhand about the money; it was good money. But the pinholes on a cheque were designed to instruct a croupier precisely how much credit he was to allow. Simple. But in law it sounded sinister.

'Why don't you give it all up, William? Why don't you give

it up?' It was Sunday and deep winter. The southern counties were icebound. Roads to the north were blocked. The wind was so cold that not even a gambler would be out looking for an easy coup. So Crockford sat at home in St. James's, very much the family man, a barrel of oysters on the sideboard, from which he had been helping himself to half a gross during the evening. These, their taste sharpened with a round or two of tongue and a hunk of Stilton, enabled him to get through after dinner with nothing more in the way of a serious meal. Like all gluttons, Crockford delighted in snacks; by midnight he would lurch to bed convinced that he had had an abstemious evening.

But tonight even he was not enjoying his food, and as the oysters slipped down and he sucked his fingers his thoughts were far away. He was tired; his facial muscles seemed to sag with worry; he was pale. His mouth was dirty and his eyes red. His limbs ached, and he swilled down a goblet of Madeira to drive the cold out of his body. At home, on the rare occasions he was at home, he liked to swig the wine he denied himself at work.

He smiled at his wife. It was a friendly smile. 'You don't have to worry, my dear. Everything will be all right.' The wine brought the sweat out on his forehead and he wiped his face with his napkin. 'Sarah, I do wish I could spend more time at home. I like these evenings. We sit round the fire — doing nothing. Just resting.'

'You mean just eating.' But her voice was softer than her words. 'But I'm worried, William. It's getting more dangerous every day. You're spending a fortune buying off common informers. You're paying bribes all over London. It can't go on.'

Crockford spooned up an oyster, folded a slice of bread round it, and smacked his lips over its lingering taste. Then he lifted the shell, drained the salty liquid that was left behind it, took a sip of Madeira, and belched. 'What I pay out is more than covered by what I win. You know that.'

'What about this new prosecution? They say you'll really be up in court this time.'

'Yes.' Crockford nodded and was silent. It was a full minute before he answered. He rose, went to the sideboard and carved himself a round of ham, which he ate with his fingers, wiping them busily on the napkin dangling from his neck.

'Don't worry,' he said suddenly. 'I'll buy him out, just like the others.'

'But suppose you can't?'

'Then I'll buy his witnesses out.'

'Suppose they can't be bought?'

Crockford waved his fork. 'Then I'll buy the jury. Believe me, Sarah, the man with the money always wins. Mind you, I don't say this gambling wave will last for ever. But it has years in it yet — years.' He had taken certain decisions. His mind was easier. 'Sometimes I wonder, my dear, whether I oughtn't to build a new club — a club of all clubs — a club so perfect that the whole of London society would have to belong to it. Think of the money I'd make with the Duke of Wellington as a member.'

'There you go again, William. The Duke of Wellington, indeed. You're always getting ideas above your station. You've got four clubs already. You don't have to think about another one.'

'Don't I? Don't I?' Crockford wiped his hands on the napkin and threw it on the tablecloth. He looked round the room with approval. 'Let's not talk about it, my dear. You don't understand these things. I must go.'

She looked up sharply from her embroidery. She was plump, and child-bearing had lined her face. But it was a kindly face, warmed by candlelight. It was his paradox that he treated her foully but respected her; it was hers that he was a perpetual humiliation but that she still followed him.

'You're not going out, surely?'

'Yes. I must. I've some work to do.'

'I thought you said there was no play tonight.'

'No. There isn't. My dear, can't you see I'm worried? I can't just sit here, like a waiting tradesman. I can't be what I'm not.'

I'm being hunted, see? They're closing in on me. All right. I must get out on to the streets, and think things out in my own way. I've got to make up my mind about something. I shan't be long. Least, I don't think so. Don't wait up for me. Good-night, my dear.'

It was better outside, in the blizzard. With your collar high against the driving snow, with the sting of the stuff on your face, a man could think. He trudged heavily through the streets; the slopes were frozen underfoot and there was a thick layer of snow over the ice. The scene was lit fitfully by a large moon, appearing intermittently through the tearing snow clouds. It was no night to be out, but on such a night the streets were safe from footpad and beggar. Even the watch was silent, the call of the hours tearing away down the wind and inaudible. Snow piled up in doorways; braziers brought flickering comfort to the homeless in the stews behind the main streets. The smells of the city were chilled in the frosty air, so that London for once smelled sweet.

But Crockford paid heed to none of these things. Hands deep in pockets, he walked unseeingly through the alleyways behind St. James's, his mind racing. First he must deal with Orme. Then he must account for Orme's chief witness, a Spanish cavalry officer who, according to the depositions, was lured into the King-street club while on a visit to the English court. Absurd. No one had ever heard of the fellow; he was probably some seedy little foreign waiter, anxious to earn a dishonest guinea. Next he must account for the two informants who had worked at his houses. They presented no problem. They could be settled in the night.

As he walked, Crockford sensed that this was his crisis. This man Orme had backing. This was no ordinary blackmailing information. It came through good solicitors. It was intended for action. They were determined to run him into court and out of business. There was no question of buying them out. Well, he had handled these things before, and could do it again.

But what was wanted, Crockford realised, was something more. He could deal with Orme, possibly; not easily, but possibly. But could he continue dealing with the next Orme. And the next? And the one after that? The reformers were clamouring for his head in the papers. Here and there a sporting journal took a broad-minded tolerant view and laughed at all the clamour. But even then it was half-hearted. The fact was that the reformers had the voices and he had the money. There must be a way around it.

Crockford was past Temple Bar before he returned, and trudged back to St. Giles. What he needed, he decided, was a voice for himself. The public was being stirred against gaming because the gamesters never presented their own case. What was wrong with dicing, anyway? If a fool wanted to lose his money who were the Methodists to interfere? Why shouldn't a man gamble? Hadn't they always gambled? Wasn't the Bible itself full of lotteries? What the public wanted was to hear the other side of the case. The journals must be made to speak with two voices, and not one. There was a campaign against the gamblers in the prints. Right. There was another side to the question. Two things were needed. First, the public must be given the gambler's view. Secondly, the reformers must be exposed as rogues.

His mind made up, Crockford climbed the steps to the attic in which his servant Milling kept a whore. Milling, like so many of the gambling hangers-on, led two lives. As Crockford's servant he went about his business, coughing lumpily, ready for any villainy. When not wanted he would be off to St. Giles, to the voluptuous flaxen-headed wench who delighted him. On his pickings from the gamblers he could have afforded something better in both house and woman. But he was brought up in St. Giles and content to remain there.

Crockford thumped at the door, grumbling at the delay. Behind the candle flame the consumptive's face was drawn and feverish, his temples sweaty. Crockford paid no attention to the drab, huddled under the bedding. He kicked the door closed

behind him. 'We've work to do,' he said shortly. He looked at the whore, took a sovereign from his pocket and threw it down on to the bed. 'Go on, get out.'

She took the money, grinned, and started dressing. Crockford watched her until she had finished. Not bad. Not bat at all. She giggled, aware of the scrutiny. He had a feeling that when the servant was dead she would be round at his place in St. Mary-le-bone one night. And that, judging by the look of the fellow, and his bubbling sputum, would be very soon now.

'Let's get to work,' Crockford mumbled, as the door closed.

They talked for more than an hour. When it was over Crockford nodded and trudged off downstairs. In the doorway he found the woman, huddled against the snowstorm. She looked desirable in the moonlight. He pawed her affectionately, but his mind was not really on such matters. 'You know where I'll be when he's no good to you,' he said casually, making off into the street.

His next call was the Tun Tavern. It was nearly midnight, and the place was practically empty. Simon, the landlord, was thinking of going to bed.

'Can you get me two thousand sovereigns?' Crockford asked.

Within a quarter of an hour he was walking eastwards to Fleet-street. Behind him walked three of his men; the one in the middle was heavy with gold.

It was nearly one when he accompanied a man from the Rainbow Tavern to a house in Racquet Court. They talked for perhaps twenty minutes, and the man often nodded acquiescence. Suddenly a bag of gold opened and cascaded sovereigns on to the table between them. They glanced dully in the candlelight. There was no need for the gesture; it was dramatic and theatrical. But Crockford had an intuitive feeling for such things.

'We understand each other?' Crockford asked.

The man looked at the gold, and nodded.

It was after three when Crockford appeared in a similar scene in another house in the district. He was a man who did not believe in waiting.

Again a bag of gold cascaded on to a table. And again a man, his eyes heavy with sleep, nodded his agreement.

Crockford went home happy.

Within a few days several things happened: a young officer of Spanish cavalry was seen off on the frigate from Dover, his purse well lined. An informant who had once worked as a servant in a gaming house was found in Clerkenwell, hideously beaten and so tortured that he was later to die gibbering in Bedlam. A second informant disappeared altogether, and despairing efforts by solicitors' clerks failed to trace him.

So when a certain case, based on a public information, came up for hearing, it collapsed through lack of evidence. And it produced, in its collapse, a witticism which delighted the public prints of the day.

Referring to the gallant Spanish officer, who could not be found, counsel explained that he should have been appearing for the plaintiff. Whereupon counsel for the defence rose and said: 'In view of his absence, your worship, it would seem rather that he is disappearing for the defendant.'

The cynicism was perfectly timed, and softly delivered. There was no suggestion of impertinence, but rather one of worldly wisdom. The magistrate chuckled; the scriveners grinned. The sally went round the clubs. The case was dismissed.

It was noticeable that from that moment the temper of the public seemed to change. The journals accepted the trial, or rather the lack of trial, with a certain wit, an acceptance that the gamblers had triumphed, and a relish in their triumph. Certain journals seemed to enjoy the situation more than others. In some the reformers continued to howl for justice. In others there was a very British spirit of tolerance, a good-tempered demand to live and let live. Two journals in particular, it could have been noticed, were loud in their contempt for the informants and in their demand that a man should be allowed to have a plunge if he so wanted. They did not lead the more liberal viewpoint which started to reflect itself in the prints; but they contributed to it.

Crockford read the editorials and chuckled. He was vastly pleased with himself.

He was still more pleased when one of those journals launched a scurrilous attack on a clerk named Orme, who had recently laid an information against a gaming house. The fellow was exposed as the most contemptible cat's-paw, who had accepted a bribe from interested parties to fake up evidence. It was a vicious attack, but, although the lawyers fussed and fumed, the disclaimers made little impression. It was the original attack which mattered.

The town read the accusations in the coffee houses and the clubs, and the town chortled. These reformers were all alike; no better than they should be. They raved and ranted, but what were they at heart? Busybodies, forever trying to interfere with other people's freedom. Yes, the town grinned, read the details with enthusiasm, and went off the happier to the dicing shops and the gaming tables. Far best to let things alone; if a man wanted to gamble, let him. England was a home of free men, and a man could do what he liked with his own money. The reformers could be damned for their pains.

Up and down, up and down, went the luck. But mainly up.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IF the world of William Crockford prospered, so did that of John Gully. The two men dominated the betting rooms of Newmarket and Doncaster, and lorded it over the lesser fry in the London taverns where the racing men fraternised. Outwardly they were hostile, ever ready for a snarl, avoiding each other as much as possible. Inwardly Gully despised Crockford, whose lack of finesse he never failed to remark on, and Crockford hated Gully. It was a rivalry which flared up periodically to amuse the fancy. In 1827 the sparks which had flashed between them kindled fire. It happened that Gully, who was developing social ambitions, bought the famous horse Mameluke. He had previously owned a number of minor nags, poor vehicles for bet or jockey. Now he approached Lord Jersey openly as soon as Mameluke had won the Derby.

'Will you sell him, my Lord?' the ex-pugilist asked.

'Sell the Derby winner?' The outspoken Jersey hesitated. They haggled. 'You and Crockford are about the only rich men left in England,' he said suddenly. 'You can afford a good price.'

Gully duly paid one. It cost him four thousand guineas.

'There's one condition, my Lord,' Gully murmured, as they closed the bargain. 'I'd like the sale to be kept secret for a week, so that I can get my bets on for the St. Leger without anyone knowing the name of the new owner.'

Lord Jersey grinned. He was fond of Gully, whom the nobility regarded with an affectionate tolerance. 'What's this?' he asked. 'Another of those battles between you and Crockford?'

It was the height of the summer racing season and the 'Tun' was crowded. The London night was violet after sundown; the streets were warm and high-scented, sometimes foully so.

The flares of the linkmen made a gay pattern in the thronging thoroughfares. It was a night for high adventure and many a titled matron went masked by sedan chair to an illicit lover, while her lord, unsuspecting, hustled to the same part of the town for dalliance of his own.

The smell inside the 'Tun' was sharper than it was outside, for the racing men rode a lot and bathed but little, and the road back from Ascot had been sweltering.

Gully, the ownership of the season's Derby winner safe in his pocket, entered the 'Tun' only a few minutes before Crockford, and the fancy silenced itself respectfully while they bargained over two vast wagers against Mameluke in the St. Leger. Eventually the odds to £10,000 were struck twice, once that the horse would beat ten named horses, and the second time that he would beat nine.

Distrusting each other, they insisted that the bets were in writing.

'You must give it up, William. You must. I can't carry on much longer.' The voice of the normally placid Sarah was urgent.

Crockford looked up from the dinner table, where he was attacking a cold rump steak pie. 'Don't worry, my dear, we're perfectly safe. This pie's very good.'

'We're not perfectly safe. Every tradesman goes out of his way to tell me what's going on. Apparently the whole of London knows. You've a fortune on this St. Leger.'

'I always have a fortune on the St. Leger. It's nothing.'

'But this man Gully's connections are the best people in England —'

Crockford pushed his plate away. The woman could be a nuisance when she started interfering with things she did not understand.

'Gully's connections haven't got a farthing on Mameluke,' he said shortly. 'The money's all Gully's. It's supposed to be a secret, but I knew inside a few hours. When Gully said he was

backing him for his gentlemen friends he was actually putting the money on for himself.'

'Then he must be sure of winning.'

'Of course he's sure of winning. Otherwise he wouldn't bet, would he? But he won't win, my dear. He doesn't stand a chance. You see, I need the money just at present to pay for the new club building.' He surveyed himself in the mirror and was quite pleased with what he saw. Really, for a man in his fifties he didn't look a day more than forty-five. It was what came of keeping a good table and a good bed; it was the reformers who died young and unsatisfied. He looked at her and smiled. 'Don't worry, Sarah. You see, there are things one can do when the horse is Gully's, and not Lord Jersey's.'

'You're mad,' she said entreatingly. 'If you try and get at a horse they'll hang you.'

'Nonsense. And I'm not getting at the horse. I'm meeting a man at the end of the week. That's all. You see, my dear, apart from the cash, I've quite a score to settle with Mr. Gully.'

'William!' Her tones rose. 'Don't you realise that Dan Danger was hanged at Newmarket. Hanged! For interfering with a selling plater. It doesn't seem much of a crime, compared with what you're talking about.'

Crockford paused at the door. 'Danger was a fool, Sarah,' he said softly. 'He made many mistakes. The chief of them was trusting the wrong people. That's where I'm clever. I only trust one person. You.'

She hesitated. 'You've a precious strange way of showing it. You never pay the slightest heed to me. You remember Danger and watch out.'

'Rubbish, my dear. It's only the failures who end up on the gallows. The clever ones like me take their wives to watch the hangings. They're so much more amusing. Good bye, my dear, I may be away for a night or two.'

In a private room at the inn on Barnby Moor, on the Great

North Road, a Londoner sat waiting for his visitor, spending the time profitably with a brace of grouse and a rib of beef.

He had arrived as dusk was falling, and had kept himself well muffled while the lackey showed him to his room. There had been a leer on the fellow's face when the caller mentioned a visitor who would ask for Captain Francis. The servant had taken his florin and bowed himself out, ready to show in some strumpet who would arrive eagerly within the hour.

Instead, he showed in a solitary horseman, who approached from the north.

For an hour the men dined and talked generally. Then they turned to business.

'Mameluke is a difficult horse,' The man said finally. 'Difficult. It isn't easy to get it started. See? And there are at least two other horses in the race which are likely to give you trouble — so it won't be hard for you to send them away with Mameluke looking the wrong way round. See? Here's a bag of sovereigns on account.' He clanged a leather purse on the dining table. 'Make sure it's left twenty lengths and that it loses — and there'll be twice as much again for you after the race. Understand?'

The man nodded. 'Yes, If you say so'.

Back in London Crockford was sent for urgently by his chief croupier Gye.

Up and down, up and down went the luck. But suddenly it seemed to be mainly down.

The nights of the loaded dice were over. The reformers were no longer as clamorous and the prints were less marked with spleen. But a man had to watch his step, and the wild days when you could call for a special set of dice if the luck was running against you were gone for ever. These nights a hell had to be content with the normal percentage which operated in its favour. It won steadily, but if the luck turned against it, then it could lose.

Within a few hours of his return to London, and with the

Leger less than a week away, Crockford retired urgently to his private room after his call from Gye, and totted up the accounts. It was absurd. And it was damnable. But the fact remained that his nightly bank of ten thousand guineas, of which he boasted so loudly, and which was such a splendid advertisement for his strength, was being soundly beaten. For six nights running his men had had to send for fresh capital, and this at a time when his commitments on the Leger were greater than ever, for he had offered Gully liberal odds, safe in his own self-confidence.

Expertly, Crockford checked through the names of the winners. All established men, well-known gamblers; men of breeding. No question of chicanery; his croupiers were not obliging their own kind. He was not being swindled. He was the victim of a freak run of bad luck.

Crockford hastened that night to his club in King-street, convinced that the luck must change. He arrived in time to see Lord Reading win a handsome coup. Only a few sovereigns remained on the table in front of the marker. He nodded to Gye, and took instant command of the situation.

'My lords and gentlemen,' he murmured, in his gaming table sing-song. 'We started tonight with a bank of ten thousand guineas and already it has been won by Lord Reading and his party. This is the tenth night running, my Lords, since the bank has had to send for reinforcements.' The gamblers, crowded round the table, grinned and chuckled. There is no one happier than a winner. 'If you will give us just a few minutes, gentlemen, I'll see that our capital is restored, and we'll continue the game. I'll take over the bank myself.'

Again the murmur of approval. How much better to win from the Fishmonger than to win from his lackeys. Crockford looked around, at the keen faces, at the talismen and the masks — for even at that late year some of the gamesters still affected a lucky mask, which had grown old with them. He sighed to himself; if only he could use some special dice. Once. Just once. But, no; it was safer not to; providing he could keep going he would get it all back.

News of the run of luck travelled fast, and as the night grew older so the crowd round the table deepened. But the elusive luck did not change. At four in the morning, when the last reveller had had enough, the second bank was practically exhausted.

Crockford walked up St. James's, his eyes heavy with sleep, his stomach empty.

As the news spread around the town so the pressure on the bank at Crockford's leading club increased. Gamesters who had not been seen there for a year or more crowded around the croupier; regulars arrived early to take up favourite positions; men whose gambling was notorious throughout all sporting London sent chairmen round to advise the management that they would expect to play at such an hour. Ude, the chef, was distracted and scarcely able to provide sufficient food for the press of visitors. But his great reputation was involved and he accepted the challenge, his hirelings working ceaselessly round the clock.

Crockford himself, as the run became more desperate, preferred to stay at home. It was damnable; it was fiendish; the fact remained that at a time when he had a fortune staked on the St. Leger he should be losing thousands of pounds, night after night, in some wild freak of the laws of averages. Of course he should be winning, and of course he would win, given the time. But the fact remained that at the moment he was losing, and losing, and losing.

His despair communicated itself to his wife; he left his women alone; even more significant, he went off his food. For three nights he never slept, but sat huddled up by his fire, waiting for the hourly runner to come round from the club with the latest news from the table. As he waited he fretted and fumed, and sighed for an honest pair of loaded dice. But, he kept reassuring himself, turning in his extremity to bottle after bottle of Madeira, the luck was bound to change. It was bound to.

Suppose Gully did lose the St. Leger, and, God knows, he had done his best to make sure of it — even then that would

be a mere fleabite. His Leger winnings would be nothing against his table losses; it was only if he lost on both race and cards that the future became too hopeless to think of; he would be back where he started, selling fish.

Barely twenty-four hours before the big race at Doncaster he took a decision which showed how desperate he felt. He decided not to post up the Great North Road, but to stay in London, to be near at hand if necessary. There was nothing he could do about the race; he had already done his worst for Gully. But there was something he could do down in King-street. His credit now was nearly spent; he could at best put up the capital for but two more banks.

Yes, he decided, biting the quicks of his nails, he could let one more bank run its natural course. But if that went against him, and he was reduced to his last fling, then he would have to take the final risk and change the dice over. That at least would turn the luck.

That night, with Mamcluke and the others already stabled in Doncaster, he sat feverishly by the fire, waiting for the call from his man. When it came, the news was bad.

'There's a great mob of them down there,' Gye said quickly. 'They're pressed right to the door. They've gone mad. They're offering each other up to a hundred pounds for a seat at the table. I've never seen anything like it.'

Crockford waved his hands. 'What about the bank?'

'Down to less than three thousand. That's why I came up.'

Crockford took a walk up and down the room.

'If they win tonight we're finished,' Gye was saying. 'It's not just your money — it's mine. We're all in it.'

'Don't be a fool. I've got a pound in to every sixpence of yours. I'm losing over a hundred thousand.'

'But it's every penny I've got.'

'All right. It's every penny I've got. Listen, tonight we put up the last bank. The money's already waiting in a safe in the next room. I had to arrange to get it today. It's sitting there in five little bags. And to get that money I had to mortgage every-

thing — this place, the property where the three clubs are, the place at St. Mary-le-bone, and my house at Newmarket. If we lose tonight I haven't a penny. And if Gully wins tomorrow — not that I think he will, but he may — I'll owe him nearly two hundred thousand.' Crockford knocked a bottle neck against the inglenook, kicked the broken glass into the fireplace, and poured himself a tumbler of wine. 'I wouldn't mind it so much — except for it being Gully. It wouldn't matter in the same way if I were beaten by anybody else.'

'But we can't be beaten,' Gye was saying. 'The luck's bound to turn.'

'Of course it is.' Crockford finished his drink. Suddenly he tossed the empty tumbler on to the open fire. It was a ridiculous gesture, but it was typical of his manner, theatrical as ever. 'All right, Gye, I've made up my mind. If this bank runs out and you want a new one, then send me up word immediately. I'll come down myself with the money, and I'll take over from you for the rest of the night.'

'You think you'll change the luck?'

Crockford reached for another bottle. 'I'm sure of it.'

Within two hours the runner appeared from the King-street club. The bank was nearly exhausted.

Crockford went to the safe, took out the bags of gold, hesitated for a moment, and carefully withdrew a pair of dice, which he slipped into his pocket.

He buttoned up his coat against the night air, put on his hat, but paused outside his wife's room. He opened the door. The candles were lit and she was sitting up in bed, too distracted for sleep.

'I'm going out,' he said slowly. 'Wish me luck.'

She nodded. 'Is this the last bank, William?'

'Unless it starts winning, yes.'

'Sometimes I almost hope it won't — just to get us away from all this.'

He patted her head. 'Don't worry. It'll win all right.'

Possibly it was the grin. Or the way he said it. But she realised what he meant at once. 'William — you're mad. You're mad! They've been trying to catch you for years. Now you do this. If they find out — they'll hang you.'

He shrugged. 'It won't make much difference either way.' He turned as she started crying. 'I'm sorry, Sarah. Try not to worry. It'll be all right.'

'All right! All right, you say. That's the terrible thing about you, William. You've no sense of right or wrong. You say it'll be all right if they don't catch you. But don't you realise what you're doing?'

'Of course I do. I'm taking the luck and giving it a bit of a push from behind. Look, Sarah. We've come a long way, you and me. A long way from fish shops. We've been on top of London. I've been dreaming dreams — dreams of a new and bigger club, something so vast that it will even make gambling respectable. See what I mean? Something to leave behind me. Now it's all going. Every player in London is raiding us. They're like rats running to the ripe corn. I'm there to be plucked, and they're plucking me.' He cleared his throat and spat into the fire. 'Well, I'm not going to be plucked. That's all.'

It was nearly six when Crockford walked back up St. James's. The distance was only a few hundred yards but his steps were slow. The eastern sky was pale and the dawn was coming up; scriveners hurried to work; the pavements were getting more crowded; rubbish blew in the gutters and foodstuff left out overnight offended the nostrils. A stage coach clattered westwards down Piccadilly, throwing up noise and excitement. Two early horsemen, their uniforms cloaked, cantered down to the Palace. Stables were bustling with energy as he walked past.

Crockford turned in. His body ached; his eyes ached; his mouth was foul. He was hungry, but too hungry to eat. All he wanted was rest. He lurched upstairs, his heart suddenly thumping with

the exertion, and flung himself down fully clothed on his bed. Within a few moments he would have been asleep. The door opened, and his wife, heavily gowned, peered in anxiously. The candlelight brought out the deep lines on her face and her hair was whiter than a few months ago. 'Well, William?'

He sighed deeply. 'It's all right, my dear. The luck has changed.'

Her hand shook and the candle flame flickered smokily.

'And the dice?'

'Still in my pocket. The luck turned.'

While Crockford still slept the sleep of exhaustion a matter of great importance was being decided at distant Doncaster, where a characteristic collection of good horses and rogues lined up for the start of the St. Leger.

The race itself was to be described a hundred times in sporting history, and it differed only in name and date from many similar encounters. A number of half-broken, back-kicking young stallions, presenting their jockeys with the most precarious seats, were sent to the post for no other purpose than to fidget and jostle the highly strung Mameluke. Then came the false starts — again commonplaces in those days when a race commenced at a shout from the starter.

Start after start was attempted, but the line, if it was a line, was ordered to wheel round and back. Once a number of horses got away and had to be recalled. All this had the desired effect on Mameluke, who was soon in a lather, kicking out on all sides. Sam Chifney, the famous jockey, held on grimly as the animal lurched crabwise and refused to line up.

Then, with the fancied Matilda well out in front, and with Mameluke looking the wrong way and well behind the straggling line, the 'Go' was given. It was all so neatly done; not that much worse than normality, but just thorough enough. Gully, aided by a horsewhip, helped to turn Mameluke around, and the ex-pugilist stood looking on helplessly as the horse set off in pursuit of the field, with Jim Robinson, on Matilda, a full hundred yards or more ahead.

Despite this, Chifney made ground, and made it steadily. Pace by pace as they fought it out in the straight Mameluke gained on the young mare, and for a second or two, according to some observers, headed her. But the effort was too great and the horse fell back. Matilda won, and Gully was the loser by forty thousand pounds. Back in London Crockford snored and turned fitfully, winner of half Gully's stakes.

Up and down, up and down, went the luck. But mainly up.

After the Doncaster settlement the fancy coached its colourful roistering way back to London. Crockford made no attempt to go north to collect his winnings; nor did he go to Newmarket, where some of the racing people were holding a late meeting. Gully's credit was good.

They settled privately, at the 'Tun', eyeing each other coldly across the table. Two remarkable men; a prizefighter and a fishmonger, who between them had succeeded in milking the nobility of England. A man who was fat, pale and ugly, with a mouth full of gold teeth and a limp inherited from childhood; a man with the manners of the gutter, lewd and lecherous as a village lout. The second man carried the scars of his early work, but spoke more softly and dressed more carefully. He was quick to his feet when a gentleman entered the room, whereas Crockford would look at the newcomer insolently and only rise if he thought there was a profit in it. Two odd and hostile dogs from the sporting prints; two very ambitious men, going in opposite directions.

'You'll take a cheque, Crockford?' Gully asked coldly. He was wondering how soon it would be before the fellow made a slip; that start at Doncaster was arranged for a certainty; but how on earth could you prove it? One day the man would get too confident, and then they would get him. 'I don't usually carry twenty thousand sovereigns with me.'

Crockford smiled. 'You surprise me, Mr. Gully. I should have thought that with your rich connections you would have regarded twenty thousand as so much chair money.'

Gully wrote slowly, in an uncertain round hand. 'Pay . . . William Crockford, Esquire . . . the sum of . . . twenty thousand pounds . . .' He signed with too elaborate a flourish. 'You don't mind if I cross out the 'Esquire,' do you, Crockford? After all, it's a high title to give a fishmonger, isn't it?'

'I don't want the title, Gully. All I want is the cheque.'

'Don't get excited. By the way, have you heard that I've developed political ambitions? You usually hear everything, don't you? I may even go into Parliament. And if I do, I can promise you one thing. I'll do my best to put a stop to the gaming clubs.'

Crockford chortled, and folded the cheque. 'You go into Parliament! God! Is that what they mean by reform? Surely it isn't as bad as all that, is it? You go into Parliament, indeed.'

'Why not? I'll be there, you'll see.'

Crockford ordered himself some wine. 'I'll tell you one thing, Gully. You may get into Parliament. From what I hear it isn't difficult. You can buy it. But there's one place you won't get into. I'm planning a new club, Gully — a club that'll be talked of round the world. It'll have the Duke of Wellington on its committee and it'll have the finest food and wine that you can get. Every member of the nobility will belong to it. There'll be the best plate, the best service, the best people. I'm going to build something that's new, something that's real class, Gully. And your twenty thousand will help to build it.'

'Excellent. That makes me feel a lot better, I must say.'

'But it won't get you in, Gully. Nothing will get you in. When I've opened Crockford's it'll be the last word in elegance. It won't be like Parliament. There won't be any room for a worn-out prize-fighter.'

Gully stood up. He was still wondering about the start of that St. Leger. 'Build plenty of windows in your club, Crockford, and remember to keep them open. Your fancy guests won't like the stink of fish.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WILLIAM Crockford, his hat on his lap, his heavy stick at his side, sat in solemn talk with Mr. Wyatt, the eminent architect.

'I could give you a marble staircase, Mr. Crockford,' Wyatt murmured, 'but the cost would be considerable. Without full details I could not estimate exactly, naturally, but you would have to be prepared to pay something like three thousand pounds extra.'

Crockford spread his hands. 'Don't worry about money. That's the last thing. I want the best. And the expense doesn't matter. When can you get the whole job finished?'

'Finished? My dear Sir, all these alterations will add to the time. But, anyway, we've only just started on the foundations.'

'Look, Wyatt, they tell me that you and your brothers are the best architects in London. That's why I came to you. I want the best results. And I want them quickly. I want to get that club opened.'

'But Mr. Crockford, we're architects. We're not magicians. However, I'll have another talk to the builders for you —'

'Don't talk to them. Order them. Can't they work at night?'

Wyatt smiled. 'In the dark?'

'Why not? They could use flares. It doesn't matter if it costs more. And while we're about it, what about panelling in the drawing-rooms . . .'

And in such a fashion the building of Crockford's Club, on the right-hand side of St. James's-street, up at the Piccadilly end, became one of the wonders of London. The town stood inquisitively round the excavations, and watched the workmen pressing forward by the aid of flares. Such a sight was unique. Of a day-time the chairmen could scarcely press their way through the crowds which milled round the site.

A wild rumour swept through the streets; it was said that the excavations were so deep that the very foundations of the Guards Club along the road had been weakened. The crowds watched the outer walls climb inch by inch, and marvelled. Never had such haste, such activity, such a concentration of workmen, been seen before.

Meanwhile inside the clubs and the coffee houses other rumours were busy. It was learned that Crockford was retaining Ude, his favourite chef, and paying him the fantastic salary of two thousand pounds a year. Details of the ordinary that was to be provided by the management were repeated from gourmet to gourmet, fanciful stories of exotic fruits from distant lands gaining colour and taste in the retelling.

Then came the rumours, which soon turned out to be true, that a committee had been formed to run the club, with the great Duke of Wellington himself among its members. Respectability needed no second badge. It was obvious that the club would be as exclusive as the Court itself, and the nobility made enquiries to find out the conditions of membership. There was to be an entrance fee of twenty-five guineas, with an annual subscription of twenty. Twenty-guineas for the honour of joining a gaming house; the reformers, aghast at such news, damned the whole thing as an offence against the very heavens. But in the clubs the fever was on; the Fishmonger was building the latest and the greatest of all the bells. No man of quality could afford not to join it. Hundreds of applications poured in.

It was known that Crockford himself retained control of his club, functioning through a house committee which would be responsible for its running and for the social standing of its members. The old man would be in exclusive charge of its gaming rooms, and his croupiers would operate a nightly bank of ten thousand guineas on his behalf. This for the main hazard table alone. For players who favoured other games, other rooms and other banks would be provided.

Crockford himself prospered as never before. His new club,

while as yet only half built, advertised the desirability of his existing ones, and his rooms were profitably crowded. Meanwhile his racing affairs did well.

He treated himself to a new piggery near Bury St. Edmunds, and to a new stud near Newmarket.

He could afford it. For, as the pamphleteers said, he was skinning the aristocracy of Britain.

The year was 1827, and the place was London. Before the year was two days old Crockford had succeeded in opening his great club, hard opposite White's at the top of St. James's. The front of the building was golden with flames, which rose from the tallboys lining the pavement. Early gas flames hissed. The linkmen stood on duty, torches in hand; the servants lined the steps, ready to receive the early arrivals. Inside, in addition to the gaming staff and the waiters, Ude and his assistants prepared a supper which was to be the talk of the clubs for weeks.

Crockford himself dressed slowly. He was tired. Years of planning were behind him; ambition was within an hour or two of being fulfilled. Now, in his early fifties, and with occasional pains, sharp, gasping ones, under his ribs, he felt like a man who was wearing out. He took more time now about everything; he ate more slowly; he bet less eagerly; he now drank scarcely at all; he seldom bothered with women, and when he did he mauled them with little relish, resentful of his departing powers. He was looking his age, and feeling more. And so was Sarah, mother of fourteen children who were her testimonials of a happy married life — a life in which he had been systematically unfaithful. Yet, in its odd way, it had been happy. The partnership was the only real thing in it.

'I must be off, my dear,' he found himself saying. Odd. He could have taken her to the opening. She could have dressed for the occasion, and stood by, like one of the superior servants. Yet it never occurred to him to take her, or to her to want to go. It was accepted that he had two lives. His life as a husband and

his life as a gambler. She was involved only in one of them. Ten years ago it was accepted that he had three lives, but advancing years had simplified things.

He kissed his wife on the forehead. 'This is the night I've planned. The Duke himself is coming to the opening. If you look through the curtains you'll see all the carriages arrive. We're on top of the world now, Sarah. It's Two for His Heels every time I cut cards. Why, we'll buy a farm at Newmarket on the first month's profits.'

The clubhouse was only a door or two up the road, but he found it difficult to get into his own premises, so heavy was the press of people outside the building. Clubmen who were curious, housewives who were inquisitive, beggars who were envious; they stood shoulder to shoulder, with here and there a man in uniform; a solid, staring mass, open-mouthed at the illuminations, waiting for the great coaches that were to bring the nobility.

Crockford struggled through the crowd and entered unrecognised. It would have been easier to go in round the back, but his sense of theatre prevailed. It was more uncomfortable, but it was proper, to get in the right way. He climbed the steps, unacknowledged monarch of the scene.

A quick round of the premises; a word with Ude; a reassurance from the head waiter; a hasty talk with Gye, who was in turn issuing instructions to his croupiers; a command here, a rebuke there. One by one they started to arrive; the Fishmonger himself, dressed in black but with noticeably good linen, remained in the background, sometimes going off hurriedly to the desk in his private room, sometimes hovering like a privileged spectator at the top of the great staircase. As the guests arrived they were announced and received by members of the house committee before passing in to the main reception rooms, where Ude's satellites had prepared a remarkable buffet. Never was there such a scene; never did gaming have such splendour, such respectability.

The scene faded from one night into another, to be repeated month after month, year after year, the envy and admiration of diarists and diplomats, the veritable centre of fashionable London in its day. The Fishmonger's triumph was complete, for he whose club embraced the legislators was now palpably above the law.

Suppers of the most exquisite kind, prepared by Ude and his staff, were provided free to members, accompanied by the rarest and choicest wines. Every luxury of the season piled the nightly table. The members, as Gronow wrote, included all the celebrities of England, from the great Duke to the youngest ensign of the Guards; and according to that authority the gay and festive board, which was constantly replenished from midnight to early dawn, was the scene of the most amiable conversation, the gayest sallies of wit, interspersed with serious political discussion. Soldiers, scholars, poets, statesmen and men of pleasure packed the rooms night after night. When the House of Commons went home the carriages rattled across from Westminster and drew up in file outside the great clubhouse; as the balls and parties of the London season ended in the dawn so the elite would rush straight to Crockford's, there to spend the last hour of the night at the gaming table — or, if they preferred, at the late supper table.

The tone of the club, added Gronow, who was nothing if not an admirer of it, was excellent. A most gentleman-like feeling prevailed, and none of the rudeness, familiarity and ill-breeding which disgraced some of the minor clubs would have been tolerated for a moment. The picture changed but little from season to season; beards were then completely unknown, and the rare moustachios were only worn by officers of the Household Brigade or the Hussars. Stiff white neckcloths, blue coats and brass buttons, rather short-waisted waistcoats, and heavily embroidered shirt fronts with gorgeous studs of great value — these were considered the right things. So attired, a man could take his place in the world of elegance and hazard. He was thus fit to belong to Crockford's.

The foreign diplomats, Prince Talleyrand, Count Pozzo di Borgo, General Alava, the Duke of Palmella, Prince Esterhazy, the French, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese and Austrian ambassadors — and all people of distinction and eminence — would arrive in London and belong to Crockford's as a matter of course. The great Duke himself, getting increasingly lonely in his advancing deafness, was fond of the society of the dandies, although he was not one of them; but he frequently called in at the club. Lord Raglan, Lord Anglesey, Sir Hussey Vivian and many more Peninsula and Waterloo heroes were regular visitors. Disraeli and Bulwer Lytton represented the fashionable writing of the day — and dispensed some of the best conversation at the supper. Horace Twiss would display his vast appetite to the envy of all, while Edward Montagu would exhibit his thirst, which enabled him to drain bottles at the gulp. Alvanley and his followers would shine for the brilliance of their wit; their epigrams would go the rounds of the clubs and within a few weeks would become the common change of small talk throughout educated England.

In the chief playroom, again according to Gronow, you could hear the clear ringing voice of Tom Duncombe; see the affectation of Sefton who made much play in rattling the dice box; watch the slow dribbling throw of King Allen; the chasing of nines and fives by Ball Hughes and Auriol; the heavy stakes called so regularly by Lord Lichfield and Lord Chesterfield, by George Payne, St. Vincent Cotton, by D'Orsay and by George Anson. These men were the noble sportsmen of their day; elegant, illustrious, spectacular.

Above all, wrote Gronow warmly, the onlooker noted particularly the gentlemanly bearing and the calm and unmoved demeanour, under losses or gains, of all the men of that generation.

Crockford, as the club developed, moved to a desk in the corner of the main salon. There he watched; silent; authoritative. He studied servant and croupier; he watched players whose credit was good; men of fashion whose losses had drained their

resources. He paid out more and more for the most private information about a man's solvency; he gave credit, but he gave it only to sure signatures. If a man was in doubt he would cut the advance by half or more. If the man was bankrupt he would shake his head. There would be a pause, while a servant accompanied the fellow to the door. It was Crockford's genius that he never refused credit where credit was due. A gambler denied further accommodation would know the reason why perfectly well. And he would be as anxious to escape without drawing attention to himself as would be the club to get rid of him. Sometimes, it was said, he would receive a sovereign or two on the doorstep, a tip from one of the crew whom he had himself patronised so lavishly.

* Principal lieutenants under Gye were Page, Darking and Bacon, the three croupiers, who between them worked the clock round from early evening onwards. Their manners were suave, their appearance sleek, their neckcloths were stiff, and correctly white. With an almost miraculous dexterity they would sweep away the chips from the punters, expressionlessly. The whole operation was conducted, like the club, with impeccable good taste.

Up and up went the luck. Up and up.

The position was absurd and paradoxical. Here was a land in which dicing was illegal, and here was a club in which thousands of sovereigns changed hands nightly, the punters being the very legislators who officiated over the realm. It was fantastic; it was grotesque; it was English. It was too good to last.

The fame of the club rose and rose, until membership of Crockford's became the highest ambition of the schoolboy, a synonym of success and acceptance by society. To belong to it was to be a gentleman; not to belong, to remain a questionmark. Even men who had no taste for play rushed to join the club, and eased their consciences by going into the salon on the last day of the season to throw ten guineas on to the table. To Crock-

ford they were an expensive liability in the supper room, but they were an asset in the eyes of the world. They contributed to the aura of respectability which great wealth and position contrived to create around the club.

But, of course, it could not last, although in fact it insolently succeeded in surviving for many years. But the pulpits and the leader columns were loud in their denunciation, the reformers watched and waited for their chance. The pamphleteers and the versifiers, conscious perhaps that they had the bulk of decent society behind them, became more and more daring.

Crockford, derisively jeered at as the Fishmonger, was dubbed 'the Father of Hell and Hazard', a lurid mouthful which fairly represented the literary level of the scribes. He was attacked in verse, attacked in broadsheet, attacked from the church, attacked from the Press. While he had remained a grubby ill-kempt anonymity of the London taverns society had at least tolerated him; now that he had the wealth of a nobleman, and the security of some great merchant banker, that same society felt outraged.

An unknown pamphleteer produced 'Crockford's Club, or The Great Hell of Pandemonium.' It sold recklessly like cheap wine throughout the coffee houses, and the town laughed. Inscriptions were chalked on the façade of the great building; and obscenities started to appear, fingermarked, on the dust of his coach. 'Crockford's, or Life in the West,' a bad poem by a minor but titled poetaster, quickly followed. Crockford fumed, consulted his lawyers, ranted and paddled his arms with anger, but was told not to be foolish.

As the years passed it was obvious that the public conscience had been deeply aroused. Gambling was a fungus on the body of society, and Crockford was its most repellent excrescence.

But temporarily he was safe. Nobody realised it more vividly than he did, for he had acquired wisdom the hard way during his career. At present more than half the legislators were his members, a large number of them his ready victims. As a broadsheet said, you might as well talk of shutting the House of Commons as

talk of shutting Crockford's. But the man himself knew that it would require only one more national crisis to change all this. One threat of war; one royal death — particularly a royal death. New reigns, new ideas. It was only a question of time.

Crockford took advantage of the sunlight. He relieved the Duke of Sussex of one hundred thousand pounds. He had some spectacular duels with Ball Hughes, from which he usually emerged the winner. When one of the big gamblers made an attack on his bank word would fly round the town and the gamesters would rush to the table to watch the battle of the dice. It could not last, Crockford realised, but while it was lasting it was good.

In all this he was busy on other fronts. His racehorses did indifferently, for he had no sense for a thoroughbred and the man who had so often been smart at the odds now found the tables turned. He was sold fourth-raters as good horses; he bought foolishly. It was true that the turf was not quite as corrupt as it had been in his younger days; men like Lord George Bentinck and Admiral Byrd were carrying reform to the very starting-post. The substitution of one horse for another; doping; deliberately dishonest riding; falsifying the weights, and all these things — these went on, but to a lesser extent. It was still possible to hang a man for felony on Newmarket Heath and the likes of Bentinck made it quite obvious they would be prepared to look after the hanging themselves. So Crockford was a little less active in some directions; having made a big book, it was no longer quite as necessary to supervise certain details arising from it. He still paid for his information service, and he sat in receipt of knowledge at his club nightly. His bets were now so widely spread that it did not matter a great deal which horse won, for he usually stood to show a profit merely from the manipulation of the odds. All the same, while horses as horses meant little or nothing to him, the horse as a medium for a gamble still excited his mind. A tiny marginal profit was not always enough. There were exceptions. There would be times when very dubious customers

would arrive at the back entrance to his house at Newmarket, and would be interviewed, not in the mansion itself but in the vinery away from the main buildings. At such times Crockford felt the thrill of youth.

In other directions youth seemed far away. As he neared the sixties he realised that the fires were spent; not for years now had he fumbled for serving wench or grabbed at hesitant matron. It was strange; food and gambling and women. The three passions had dominated his life, in that order. His lust for women had weakened first, and he could remember the night, years ago, when he had made a fool of himself with an innkeeper's woman, somewhere out up the North Road, and had pushed her away from him, furious with himself. Since then he had confined himself to food, and his digestion was now not as good as it was. He still ate hugely, but he had gnawing pains before and after meals and there had been a day when he had vomited what looked like coffee grouts, following which his eyes were weak and his head was dizzy. But he had got over it, and the pains round his heart, which hit him suddenly, were no more frequent and no worse. Considering how he had lived, he was dying slowly.

The second passion had lasted the longest. It was not just the gambling which appealed; it was the thrill of pitting yourself point by point against the next man, shouting the odds a split second faster, shading the quotation to show a profit; making arrangements if the issue were important enough and the prize worth the risk. It was not so much that Crockford was by nature a rogue; it was simply that he had no normal sense of morality. They had cheated in Billingsgate when he was starting; they had continued to cheat at Newmarket and in the hazard shops while he was establishing himself, and it seemed perfectly natural to go on cheating, when the need justified it, now.

Up and down, up and down, went the luck. But almost always up.

London's most successful estate agent had his offices just behind Piccadilly, not very far from the 'Tun' and the gaming houses, quite near to Crockford's own empire.

He received the ageing gambler with the respect that money demanded; clerks ushered Crockford forward into the parlour behind the office. The head of the firm rose and bowed respectfully. Crockford might be a tired gamester, but he represented the new aristocracy of England.

'We have completed our inquiries on your behalf, Sir,' he said smoothly, as his visitor sat down. 'And we can offer you what is probably the finest house of its type in all London — in Hanover Square itself. And it has the best garden in the neighbourhood.'

'I don't want the garden. I can get all that at Newmarket. And I don't want a house in Hanover Square. It isn't good enough. I've been thinking. Find me a place in Carlton House Terrace.'

'Carlton House Terrace, Sir! But since they pulled the old house down and built these new places, it's become the most exclusive property in the whole town. There aren't more than a dozen houses there, and they've fetched enormous prices.'

'I don't mind the price, my dear man, I want the house.'

'But there isn't one for sale, Sir. I assure you. If there were my partners and I would certainly know about it.'

Crockford waved the objection aside. 'I tell you how to go about it. Make out a list of the people who are living there — and pick the poorest one for an offer.'

'Mr. Crockford, Sir! There are no poor people in Carlton House Terrace. It's the richest property in London.'

'Then pick the least wealthy one, then. Find out what he paid for the place, and offer him fourfold. I've made up my mind about this, Mr. Snell. I wasn't born in Carlton House Terrace, or any place like it. But I'm going to die there.' He chuckled. 'Not just yet awhile, mind you.'

Up and down, up and down, went the luck. But mainly up.

The seasons succeeded each other. So did the croupiers. So did the players. The espionage system in the city went on; so did the method of marking cheques to let the table know the value of a man's credit. The suppers remained the most remarkable in Europe. And the Fishmonger, going bald now and white, sat quietly at his corner desk, his eye missing nothing; lord of the hazard, king of the betting market.

Regularly he would change the chips on the tables, to prevent counterfeiting. Sometimes, on information laid, he would change them unexpectedly, week by week. At the end of play he would watch as the chips were cashed; the sovereigns were paid out, the cheques passed. The game went on; only the players and the servants changed, grew old, dropped out, and died. Only Crockford and the dice, it seemed sometimes, were real; the rest was a shadow show, flickering on the walls behind the candlelights.

The fateful year of 1832 came in like a lamb and went out in a gale. It was the year of reform; it was a year when Crockford continued to add to his fortune; but more than that it was the year of John Gully's greatest triumph, the year when a prize-fighter of three immortal battles became a Member of the newly reformed Parliament.

For years now Gully, who had a shrewd manner, had been grooming himself for gentility. Whereas Crockford bought property in London and around Newmarket, Gully preferred the north country. Around Doncaster he was accepted as a squire among gentry; his place at Ackworth Park was one to which a gentleman was pleased to accept an invitation. It was typical of him, as diarist Greville wrote somewhat grudgingly, that over the years he had slowly separated himself from the rabble of gamblers and blackguards of whom he was once a leader, and had so acquired gentility 'without ever presuming towards those whom he had been accustomed to regard with deference.'

Now, with reform in the air, Gully's own devotion to the liberal cause was to help him realise his ambition. He was popular, particularly on race days; the people of the broad county held

him in high regard, as was natural, for was not he an undefeated champion among sportsmen?

At first Gully refused to put his name forward. But on the second dissolution of Parliament he accepted his second chance. It was his opportunity to establish himself; as a rich gambler he was one among several. As an ex-prizefighter in the House of Commons he would be unique. Not unnaturally, he accepted. So John Gully, red-faced and beefy, squire of some admirable broad acres and owner of bloodstock, added two letters after his name and took his place with the squirearchy, accepted as an equal.

Crockford heard the news and cursed. It was absurd; but he could not overcome it. This hatred of Gully was one of the few mainsprings in his life. To curse Gully was natural, to beat him in a bet was a pleasure; to twist him out of a win was a delight; to hear that he had scored a victory was wormwood. Now here he was, in Parliament, a gentleman among the gentry. It was a triumph, and Crockford hoped that his spleen rotted. Step by step, year by year, they had advanced together, getting to something like the same place by different paths. They had argued, they had raged, they had fought; they had divided some of the spoils. Crockford had made more money, but had remained a fishmonger. Gully rode to hounds, drank like a gentleman, and now went to Westminster.

Crockford reacted sharply. He refused credit to a younger son; he snubbed an earl; he sent a tart note for delivery to the estate agents, to demand what was happening about Carlton House Terrace. He decided at once to go ahead with an idea with which he had been toying; he would build the finest exhibition salon in the whole of London just down St. James's, on the corner of King-street. In this way he would dominate the street of clubs, governing it at top and foot. He would also buy the new farm at Bury St. Edmunds, and he would see about the mining proposition which they wished him to finance near Glasgow.

Above all this he must buy more horses; better ones; horses

which could win classics. Gully had owned a Derby winner after it had won Lord Jersey's colours. He must go one better, and win the race himself.

What else could he do to rub in his superiority? He could set up some titled woman in a house somewhere, and make it just obvious enough to set the clubs talking. The higher the title, the greater the triumph. Already there were one or two likely candidates. He was old these days, and such hair as he had was white. But he was still the greatest of all gamblers and that meant there were women enough who would be only too intrigued to go to bed with him. He turned the thought over in his mind. It would be amusing. It would be a most effective score over the respectable Gully, whose second wife, a Catholic, had presented him with a generous clutch of growing youngsters. But there was no sense in pretending. The idea was fanciful, but it wouldn't do. Why should he make a fool of himself all over again? Why be sneered at by a strumpet, titled or not?

Crockford watched the last victim depart for the night. It was December, 1832, and across the way in Westminster ardent men were looking at the present with respect and the future with confidence. History was being made; the second reformed Parliament was settling down. Mighty deeds were commonplace and the future of the nation promised fair. A great year was drawing to a close, a year in which Britain had led the world in expressing the liberality of its feeling. This was indeed a new age, an age of enlightenment, of equality, of fraternity, and of progress. An age when the world was spinning faster on the lathe of evolution, and when decent men everywhere looked to the years to come, their heads high with hope.

Crockford, to whom such things were but the drivellings of idiots, went down to his kitchen and for once proceeded to drink Madeira. It was a convenient way of forgetting the intense irritation of that smug hypocrite Gully.

As he grew older his temper and his limp alike became worse.

He walked slowly now and with a stick. And when his anger was aroused, which was often, he would raise the stick and beat the air with it, in much the same way as he had used his hands in the old days. His skin now was like parchment and his head was almost totally bald; he was still gross, but age had made his flesh sag, so that his jowl hung in loose folds down on to his collar. It was as though the skin, once stretched by surfeit, could no longer go back into place.

With advancing years, too, his sight had suffered. He could no longer see the spots on the dice as quickly as he used to, and his hand shook when he rattled the canister. His shoulders had rounded and he stooped.

But the remarkable thing about him was that his brain seemed as quick as ever it was, a brain far fresher than his body. He could still sit in the settlement rooms at Doncaster or Newmarket, listen to the babble of voices as people called the odds, and yet place a commission with a mere fraction in his own favour. He could figure just that split second quicker, and his book, when he made one, was a model for younger men.

It was the same at the Club in the season. He would still sit at his desk in the corner, appearing scarcely to be watching the game. But he would know within a few sovereigns precisely how the players were faring, where credit would soon be required, where there was a run of luck which needed watching, how the dice were falling, how the bank was holding. All these things he carried in his head, while appearing to be little occupied. A young nobleman would be running short; deftly his card would be turned up. A few coded jottings, meaningless to an intruder, gave the latest information about his personal securities and commitments, as gleaned by the informants in the City; the latest about his gaming habits, details of the other gaming clubs he went to, along with his position there; and a fair estimate of his gaming record over recent months.

That was Crockford, in his declining years, lord of the hazard, monarch still of the betting market.

Despite the elaborate world he had built, he still had his reverses. His great Club made a fantastic profit, but all the gold that passed across his tables did not represent gain. Far from it. According to the journals of the day the Club, during its greatest seasons, had an expenditure of more than one thousand guineas a week. The cost of viands and wines at its nightly suppers, given free to members, was very heavy; its servants were well paid; its croupiers and the people who worked at anything to do with the actual gaming were paid even more — in a not altogether successful effort to keep them honest and on the side of the Club. The waiters, the linkmen, and the like, were many, and although their gratuities were sometimes princely, if a man went away a winner, they were still paid more than they would have received elsewhere. Crockford was a generous employer, not because he believed in generosity, but because he knew that every man had a price.

Then there were the less obtrusive but more costly items. There was the espionage system, built up over so many years, ever ready to pay generous guineas for the right details. Despite all this, there were still bad debts in plenty; incurred because it was often inadvisable to restrict a man's credit, even though you knew it to be suspect. His friends and connections would more than make it up to you later.

And over and above all this, of course, were the payments to blackmailers and informants, to past members of the staff who knew a thing or two, and even to impoverished members who had to be bought off when they threatened to lay information. The Club, outwardly so elegant and fastidious, was in fact at the top of a pyramid of intrigue and corruption, a pyramid whose foundations went down into the indescribable degradation of the stews of St. Giles, the whore houses, the gin shops, and the common gaming hells. To these places society paid a yearly toll in disease and depravity; Crockford in his turn paid out money to the thugs, the footpads, the informers, the blackmailers, the horse thieves, the crooked jockeys who had come down in the

world, the loose women who were going up. They were people who individually could not do much. Together they could bring him down. Easy come, easy go; the dice rattled; you won, you lost. It was simpler to pay up and regard it all as part of the game. Sometimes, as a variant, and in order that too many of them would not forget his power, he would order a beating, and inside a day or two the town would hear idly that some poor wretch had been found horribly battered in one of the stews. But such things were commonplace, and only those in the know paid the slightest attention to such tittle-tattle. But beatings, as Crockford well knew, did not prevent blackmail; they created it. For the thugs who belaboured a man on his behalf would in turn incline to remind him of the favour they had conferred, expecting to be paid handsomely for their discretion. And so it went on.

Crockford accepted these things not so much philosophically as naturally; he had been brought up to expect them, and any deviation from the path of corruption would have startled him. To a man who had risen to vast fortune from a cribbage game, and who had learned to roll the right number when the reward was high enough, it was reasonable to expect such things.

Crockford's next triumph was purely domestic. It was witnessed by one person, the dutiful Sarah, to whom he was still as paradoxical as ever. The old fires had gone out long ago, and his contemptible record as a bad husband belonged to the past. With passion spent, their relationship had strengthened. To Sarah he was still the wild, restless adventurer of her youth, the only difference being that he no longer left her tearful and hurt while he went off with other women. To Crockford she remained what she had always been: the one person he could trust. He had treated her shabbily, but this thought did not trouble him, for he had never pretended that he would ever treat her otherwise. As far as he was concerned the marriage had been an unbroken success.

It was in 1836 that John Gully, M.P., scored another victory

over Crockford, by being presented at Court. The honour was one which Crockford himself would have been the last to covet personally. He had seen enough of the nobility to have a very definite opinion of them; they were chickens, waiting for the plucking. His disrespect was considerable; it simmered inside him, and in his earlier days it had sung little tunes of mocking derision, sung them as he had bowed out some title whom he had fleeced. For himself, he had no time for courts, and the only king for whom he had the slightest regard was the King of Spades, a character who had usually stood him in good stead during his playing career. So he was as interested in being presented at Court himself as he was interested in theology. But the presentation was a stamp of approval, and when Gully was presented in the last year of the reign of William the Fourth, Crockford retired and sulked.

They met soon afterwards at Newmarket. Gully no longer made a book; he was a gentleman. He employed others to place his commissions for him. But he was still at heart a rating man, and still kept his eye on the market.

'You may be good enough for the Court,' Crockford said, in greeting. 'But you still can't get into Crockford's. And you never will.'

He never did.

But if Gully scored with his presentation, Crockford certainly went ahead with Carlton House Terrace.

It took him a long time to find a house there. When he found it he told no one, not even Sarah. Instead he waited until everything was signed, and until the furnishings were completed. Then, one May day, they drove round from St. James's. The distance was a few hundred yards, at most, but Crockford now did little walking. He spent four or five nights a week at the club during the season, and retired not long before normal breakfast time. He seldom slept for more than four hours, and was up again around noon. It was no life for old bones, and when a man had a house to show he was driven round by carriage.

They pulled up outside a mansion that was elegant, and tall, and beautifully placed in a part of London where you could hear birds sing and smell the hawthorn, even in those bustling days. Just as his club was the top of a pyramid which had its foundations down in the filth of the stews, so Carlton House Terrace was the apex of a new society which had its wealth in the sweat of Lancashire and the grime around Birmingham. It was the orchid flower of an industrial revolution of which Crockford knew nothing.

• 'Well, Mrs. Crockford, and what do you think of that?' There were blackbirds singing; the shrubs were gay with colour; a street cry sounded melodiously from somewhere near; the sound of horses at the canter; silver trumpets, muted by distance, from the Palace; it was London in its May freshness.

• 'So it's Carlton House Terrace at last, is it?' She looked at the house for some seconds. She was thinking back, to a thimble rigger's counter at Highbury, to sobbing hysterical nights when she had surprised him up in St. Mary-le-bone. 'You always get your own way in everything, don't you?'

'Sooner or later, my dear, sooner or later.' He took it as a compliment and cackled happily.

'It's a lovely house, William, but it isn't built for the likes of us, really. I'd almost be afraid to live in it.'

'Nonsense, my dear. If it's good enough for the gentry then it isn't good enough for you.'

'How long is it since you first made up your mind to live here?'

'Ten years, Sarah. It's taken a long time getting it, but it's going to be worth it. Come along in. I've got the keys.'

The echoes of a large house with no one living in it; Louis furniture; sunlight pouring in through conservatory door and large casement windows; a staircase that would not have disgraced his club itself; rooms so tall and elegant that you needed a ladder to reach the ceiling . . .

'It's lovely, William. Are you sure we can afford it?' Two old people, bent forward, hobbled round with sticks.

'Afford it? Why, we're the only people left who can afford it.'

'I might have known. When do you want to move in, William? You're always such a man for rushing things. I'll have many arrangements to make. You must give me plenty of time.'

'We don't need time. We'll move in this afternoon.'

'Really, William, you're quite mad. How can we move in this afternoon?'

'Easy. We leave the other place just as it is, furniture and all. We only need to move clothes and papers. That's all. I've ordered some men round to do the job. They'll be with us by three.'

'By three! Then you are mad. You really are. This is even worse than when we moved in at Newmarket.'

'It's better, you mean. It's more exciting. Have you noticed the staircase, Sarah? I always was a one with an eye to staircases. You'll look quite a handsome old woman receiving your guests from the foot of these stairs, my dear.'

'If there are any guests to receive, William.'

He rounded on her fiercely. 'God damn it! Why did you have to say that?'

She faltered. 'I - I - it sort of blurted out. I'm sorry, William, I didn't mean to upset you.'

'You're right, damn it, you're right. There won't be any guests. That's the difference between me and Gully. He'd have guests. And it would be all handshakes and smiles. They'll go to his house and they're glad of the invitation. They'd never come to ours.' He was breathing quickly and the cane shook as he waved it. 'Never you mind, my dear. I'll make them. I'll *make* them. You see. I'll have them coming here.'

'Of course you will, William. Of course. Now don't get excited. It only upsets you.'

'I'm not excited.' The stick shook. 'I'm only furious — furious to think that you're right when you said they wouldn't come to see me. They don't mind owing me money. That's all right. They don't mind trying to win from me. That's all right, too. But I'm a leper. I'm a leper! They'll accept Gully but not me. All right. I'll show them.'

'I know you will, William, I know you will. Now forget it, or you'll spoil the morning.'

'It's spoiled already. But you'll see. By the time I retire I'll have done so well that they'll have to come to me, whether they want to or not. You'll see.'

'When you retire, William! You've been talking like that for the last five years. You'll never retire, and you know it.'

The tone changed when he answered; it was the gambler, good at calculating the odds, who now talked; not the excitable old man looking round for the slight. 'You're wrong. This time I mean it.'

'I wonder.'

'I don't. I know. I tell you, Sarah, things are happening. There are big changes taking place. It's not what it was even three years ago. The tone of the papers — they're growling in a different way. There's a new air abroad in the land, my dear. And when there's a change on the throne there'll be a change in the country. I'm only a betting man. Maybe it's because of that that I can smell public opinion downwind. The whole scene is changing. It's hard to explain. But even the Club isn't doing as well as it did. Maybe there aren't the rich people left. Maybe we've fleeced them once too often. But there's a new outlook. The public's getting tired of gambling. Gambling of my sort, that is. They want something new. The ordinary hells are half empty; the hazard shops are shutting up. There isn't the safe money that there used to be in horse racing, either. There's plenty of betting, but there are too many people like Rous and Bentinck. I tell you that the informers won't always be bought off.' Room after room; tapestries; thick carpets; choice candelabras; old silverware in new cupboards.

'When are you stopping, William?' she asked suddenly.

'I'm getting rid of the club. At the end of this year.'

'You never told me.'

'Why should I? We never talk about these things.'

'You mean you're closing it?'

'I shan't close it. I expect the government will before long, but that's another matter. No, I'm just retiring from it's management. That's all, my dear. It's as simple as that. And in my old age, I'm hoping for a few more years in which to pull off my last ambition.'

'And what may that be?' Bedrooms so big they could sleep a troop of cavalrymen; great washstands with beautiful china ewers; four-posters with choice brocades; more tapestries; stairs up to the attics and more bedrooms, small ones this time, with four beds to a room.

'I've never won the Derby, my dear. I thought I would once. But I failed, and since then I've been too busy to try again. But I'd like to have one more attempt.'

'You're not going to buy more horses, surely?'

'Why not? The money that will pay for them came from horses in the first place. It came from people like Foster. You know, my dear, I've always been lucky with horses, providing they weren't mine.'

'Then you stick to other people's and don't start interfering with what you don't understand.'

Kitchens below ground, with huge covers rising and falling from the ceilings on pulleys; long stoves like galleys; stone sculleries with large draining boards; innumerable cubby holes for the staff. Great ranges of clanging bells, the last word in domestic signalling devices.

'I admit I don't know anything about breeding, my dear. It cost me plenty last time. But I'll have leisure to learn. I'm going to buy the finest horses in England and start a stud. And I'll get a Derby winner. You wouldn't understand, my dear. You wouldn't know what's going on in my mind. But you see, Gully got into Parliament and he's become a gentleman. Well, he's never won a Derby. But I will. Now come round to the gardens and see the greenhouses.'

The year was 1838 and the place was London. A young queen had recently ascended the throne and her coronation was the

symbol for scenes of great enthusiasm. New reigns, new ideas, Crockford had predicted. With the passing of William and the crowning of Victoria the nation, like the throne, underwent a profound change. A girl so young; a symbol of honour. A queen fit for England; but was England, the journals asked in their ponderous fashion, fit for the young Queen?

And so it was that the voices of social reform were louder than ever in the land. Merrie England with its sweat shops and its pregnant women miners; happy England with its stews and its gin shops, its gaming hells and its whore houses; decent England with its thieves kitchens and its public hangings; honourable England, eaten by gaming. The paradox had gone on long enough; it was time for the nation to put its house in order.

It would not be true, of course, to attribute the reforms to the young Queen, who, indeed, was little enough aware of the need for most of them. Victoria was not so much a cause as a logical justification. Slowly, a Bill here and a measure there, the nation scrubbed its dirty linen in Westminster.

No man detected the change more surely than Crockford. The hells were declining; the huzard shops were hungry; only the great Pandemonium, as the papers called it, survived in its full glory. But it could not last; the number was in the frame.

So Crockford, with his gift for the simple move, handed his club over to a management committee and retired from the scene, as he had planned, keeping only a sleeping partner's interest.

Not long afterwards he took a morning walk, over past St. Martin's and down the Strand, ending up at the Inner Temple, only a few yards from his birthplace. As he neared his lawyer's office he stopped to study the old bulk shop opposite Temple Bar, where he had been brought up. His mother was long since dead; the fish shop itself had changed hands, but it still presented the same exterior. Some years ago the owner had fallen on bad times, but Crockford had set him up again. Strange how devoted a man could be to a stinking fish shop.

He climbed the steps to the lawyer's office and stood there

panting, pushing his way to a chair as soon as he could make the effort. When he spoke, he gasped, and that pain around his ribs was a lot worse.

'You don't look well, Sir.' The lawyer fussed over his guest, pouring water from a carafe.

'Leave me alone. I'm all right.' The hand that held the walking-stick shook violently; the legs stretched out and the head slumped forward. Slowly the breathing relaxed. 'My heart's going a bit hard. I shouldn't have walked. I'll be all right in a minute.' Damned foolish thing to have done; he shouldn't have tried to get so far. Oddly enough, he'd not felt so well for ages as he had done when he stepped out.

'I'm very sorry to see you like this, Mr. Crockford. You must need a thorough rest. What does your physician say?'

'Physician! They're a waste of money.' That was better; the pain was easing off. 'I'll always lay six to four against a man living if I know he's got a doctor at his heels. You might as well back three-legged horses for all the good doctors can do for you. That's better. Just a little turn. I'm all right now.'

'You must be careful, Sir.' The lawyer was unlocking a deed-box. 'You need to take things quietly at your age.'

'My dear man, I've been taking it easy for the last two years. And it's kept me awake at nights. It's taking it easy that's making me feel sick.'

'You miss the Club, I suppose?'

Crockford grinned. The look he gave his lawyer was almost affectionate. 'Miss it? I'm still doing well out of it, thanks to the little settlement you drew up for me. Mind you, don't let Mrs. Crockford know about that. She thinks I'm out of it altogether. So does everybody else.'

'Quite so, Mr. Crockford. You may rely on us implicitly, needless to say.'

The old man inspected his stick, without which he found it difficult to get very far. 'Well,' he said slowly, and his voice was very tired, 'I've come to see you because I want to get things

cleared up. I've still got quite a lot to do. I get worried much easier than I used to — and I'd feel a lot better if you went through my securities and sold them up.'

'What, all of them?'

'Yes. I want to divide the spoils among my boys. I think that's a fair way of doing it. And I'd like to make a new will and leave my houses and such like to my wife. She's been a good wife, Sarah, and God knows I haven't done her much good.'

He hesitated for sometime. 'And another thing. I don't always win, you know. All my little gambles don't come off. I'm in a mess on one at the moment. It's a mining scheme which I've been backing up in Flintshire. A gold mine —'

'A goldmine in Flintshire, Sir?'

'Yes, I've sunk a lot of money in it, and now it looks like bad money. I suppose I ought to have kept to dice and horses. But no matter. It all came from bad money in the first place. Maybe it's right that I lose it on the Stock Exchange.'

'How much is involved, Mr. Crockford?'

'Just over one hundred thousand pounds.'

'One hundred . . . But, Mr. Crockford, I thought we handled all your affairs. If you'd died suddenly, why, I'd never have known about this sum. It's — it's a fortune.'

'I don't believe in telling everything to everybody. Anyway, it's probably lost now. It was easy money in the first place, so I suppose it has to be easily lost. You'll find all about it in my papers here.' He handed the lawyer a thick envelope. 'You might wipe up the mess for me. With these things here you've now got the lot. So clear them up and get on with the will, if you please. I'll tell you something, Childs. I'm in my middle sixties, now, but I've lived twice as hard as any two men.' Again the pain, the flurry inside his ribs, and the erratic pulse. 'I'm sorry, you'll have to send me home. I'm getting another of these odd spasms.' The eyes closed behind the spectacles and opened again slowly. It could have been the face of a man in his eighties; a spent man. 'What I was trying to say was — I'm a long way off from the

starter these days, Childs. I'm right down the heath. Maybe I'm not far from the post.'

'Nonsense, Mr. Crockford. You'll be all right. What you want is a good rest.'

'What I want is to win the Derby. It's the only bit of business I've left unfinished.'

Slowly but surely the likes of Lord George Bentinck were reforming a turf that had been saturated with fraud. His Lordship himself introduced the horse box to the roads of England, and so stopped the ridiculous business of walking a horse the length of the kingdom. It was one reform among many. A symbol of a new age.

Here and there a horse thief or a rascal was deported; occasionally one had been hanged; betting books were called for more readily, and the horse whip provided salutary justice where a jockey or a lad was felt to be lacking in the necessary enthusiasm.

There was a sensation over the running of the horse Bloomsbury in 1839, but it was not a major one, and on the whole the racing world was a much cleaner place than it had been in the heyday of Crockford and the earlier legs. A new queen was on the throne; the old guard of the betting rooms were either dead or retiring, some of them to substantial wealth, most to the squalor and anonymity reserved for the unsuccessful gambler.

John Gully remained a power in the land. He had retired from Parliament after being returned for a second time top of the poll in 1836. His admirers brought him out again in 1841, however, when he was somewhat surprisingly defeated, much to the delight of Crockford, who vowed that the news was as good as any tonic.

At this time Gully was at the height of his popularity, particularly among racing men. The great Lord George Bentinck had stopped training at Danebury with 'Honest John' Day, thus leaving a leading trainer without a leading patron. The reformist nobleman, who had spent a fortune on Danebury, was dissatisfied

with the betting that went on there, and for good reasons of his own Lord George, in 1841, decided to transfer to Goodwood, giving his string to John Kent.

Within a few weeks John Day had urged Gully to take the vacant stalls. Gully, a west countryman who had adopted Yorkshire, agreed. Perhaps the political defeat at Pontefract still smarted. At any rate, he came south to Marwell, near Winchester. And thus started the Danebury Confederacy, as the racing men called it, an association of racing folk which was to make history, and to succeed twice in quick succession where the declining Crockford was to fail. Gully himself was the acknowledged leader of the group, with some of the most influential men in the betting ring supporting him. He had as his confederates Harry Hill, the bookmaker who had once been a boots in a hotel in Manchester; Pedley, who had inherited a fortune and a business in Huddersfield, and who hung on devotedly wherever Gully was, even to the extent of finally becoming his son in law; Jo Arnold, the big bookmaker; and Turner, a Cockney who had become a successful bill discounter with a taste for horses.

They were a formidable team; Gully was the figurehead but by no means all the brains. They were rich men, and when they betted the market felt the pressure.

All this Crockford watched from the side. He was no longer on the course itself. Excess and overwork had sapped his strength and night-long attendance at the hazard table had made him senile before his time. His faculties were fading and his vision was clouded; Gully, in his late fifties, was a man in his prime; Crockford, in his late sixties, was a man with death on his forehead.

But he was determined not to go out a loser, and convinced that he would live long enough to win the Derby.

His great chance came in 1844, when Ratan carried his colours.

But before the race Crockford had to face up to a contest of a different kind. For public taste, exactly as he had predicted, had turned full circle in the wind, and there was now strong pressure for gambling to be formally abolished.

Word went round the clubs early in the year that a Royal Commission was being set up to investigate the entire subject. It was whispered that the Court was determined to stamp out the whole business of organised gaming, and that Parliament, sensing the drift of public opinion, was behind the Queen to a man. And already the fashionable society of London, sensing the change, was amending its former ways. The great Club at the top of St. James's was now half empty. No longer did it attract the wit and gallantry of the country; no longer were its epigrams repeated respectfully throughout the land; no more did whispers of its high play fill hearts with envy. Rather, tales of its departed splendour were told only to sharpen the criticism against it.

Lord Melbourne himself, Her Majesty's Prime Minister, was said to be urging the Queen that the clubs must be closed down once and for all time.

It was the end of a dynasty.

And the town felt it would also be the end of Crockford. The old man was in his dotage. He was known to be ill. The effort of giving evidence before the Commission — and there would be scant sense in a Commission unless it heard him — would be too much for him.

Then a second rumour spread around. Crockford, it was said, was happy in the planning of a final victory. He was backing his Ratan for the Derby; and backing it heavily; in his enjoyment of a coup the old man was doing wonderfully, his mind as brisk as ever, his handling of the odds as masterful. No Commission could frighten old Crocky, said the town, while he had a likely Derby favourite in his stable.

By easy stages from London, Crockford arrived at Newmarket, where he had a house, a stud, a training quarters, two farms and a piggery. He stayed overnight at Epping and again at Saffron. The first glint of green was on the Epping trees and the spring promised fair. Around Saffron the wind blew across from the freshly sown fields of Essex and its smell was good. Blood was

warming in the veins. But to Crockford the journey was a nightmare; he seemed perpetually thirsty, unable to draw comfort from a drinking bottle; his limbs ached and the food on the road was so much cinders. On reaching Newmarket he went straight to bed, too exhausted even to be angry with himself.

It was three days before he even felt strong enough to go down to the settlement rooms. When he did so, they were crowded and a brisk ante-post market was being built up around the coming Derby. The room was hot and smelt of racing men; the noise was considerable. 'Eight to one Ratan, ten to one Orlando, and twelve to one Running Rein' was the common shout, and bets were being marked at those figures.

The first man Crockford noticed was Gully, a fleshy red-faced Gully, grey of hair, ponderous and in his late fifties. A man slow of speech and confident; a massive man, fit leader of the racing men; making one of his now rare appearances among them.

'I'll take twelves to a thousand, Running Rein,' Gully was saying, when he caught sight of Crockford. 'Why, Crockford. Here, let me give you a hand.' He led the old man over to a seat by the window. The fancy scarcely bothered to acknowledge the old master; to the youngsters he was a name, a king among gamblers who had made a fortune with a club, and then retired; to the present-day rulers of the betting market he was a back number, respectable because he was so rich. And to some of the older men he was a reminder of nearly forgotten betting coups, of wrangles and fights which were now so many results in back numbers of the Racing Calendar. Rough and rapacious in his triumph, there was no love left behind for him in his descent. A glance or two, a nod of recognition, and the fancy turned its back and went on with the business of making a book.

Not so Gully, who sat up, his hands on his knees, looking keenly at the old man whose breath was coming so quickly.

'You look tired, Crocky,' he said, not unkindly.

'I'm all right. It's hot in here. You needn't help me. I just want a bit of air.' The old man blinked and his eyes came slowly

back into focus. He listened to the babble of the market and watched them as they argued and wrangled over the slightest shade of odds. In his day he could have out-smarted the whole roomful of them, and then come to an arrangement with the starter just to be on the safe side. Even now, he could buy them all up. It was good, to feel the power of it. But his breathing was getting worse, and it was all he could do to see Gully, sitting opposite him.

'You forget me,' he said slowly. 'You get back to them.'

Gully raised the lower window frame, causing the candles to blow gustily. A leg or two turned angrily, to see the cause of this sudden and unwanted current of clean air. At the sight of Gully they shrugged and did nothing.

'You want some fresh air. Now sit quietly and get your breath back.'

'Thanks.' Crockford struggled for his words. 'No. I don't mean thanks. I don't want you to help me. I came here to make a bet with you — not to be pitied because I'm feeling a bit off colour.'

'Don't be silly Crocky.' He put a massive hand on the old fellow's shoulder. 'There's no need to talk like that. We don't want bad words. All that sort of thing was years ago.'

'Years ago? Oh no it wasn't. We've always been enemies, you and me, Gully, and we always will. I know you. I know your dirty sneers. Pretending to take pity on me one minute and saying there's a smell of fish the next. I won't have it, I tell you.'

'Good Heavens, man. All that was nearly thirty years ago. Let's forget it.'

'Forget it? Not likely.' The old voice was much stronger now. He was fighting again, and revelling in it. 'Forget it? Didn't you do me out of ten thousand when you had that win on Bendix?'

'Didn't you take me out of a lot more with Matheluke, when it was squared to lose the Leger? Now look, Crocky, don't let's start going back over the past. There's too much of it.'

You're old and you look sick. And it's better that we bury the past. Much better. We don't have to fight, you and me, don't you see that? We're the biggest men the game has ever produced. We're kings in our own right, you and me, Crocky. Don't you see what we've done between us? You built the biggest club that was ever known in England. You've skinned the whole English nobility of its ready cash — and a good bit besides. Why, you ruled the whole betting ring of Newmarket and Doncaster, old Crocky, until I came along, of course.'

'Until you came along. There you go — sneering at me.'

'I'm not sneering at you. There's plenty of room in the ring for both of us. It's mad for us to end fighting. We're getting on. After all, I'm an old man, too, you know; though not quite as old as you.'

'Sneering again.'

'Of course I'm not sneering. But I've done well, Crocky, just as you have. I can be just as proud. We can both be proud, that's why we ought to be friends. Just think of us. A fishmonger who became a millionaire living in Carlton House Terrace. And a champion of England who became a Member of Parliament.' He patted the bent old man affectionately. 'What a pair, Crocky. What a pair to be friends now they're old — and not enemies.'

Crockford shook his head. 'A champion of England who became a Member of Parliament! A fine champion of England you were — why you only had three fights in your life. And as for being a Member of Parliament — well, if they hadn't been fools enough to reform it back in '32 you'd never have got in.'

'Now you're sneering at me . . .' Gully pulled himself together and grinned. 'All right, Crocky, all right. Don't let's start that all over again.'

Crockford cackled. His voice was stronger now. 'I'll tell you one thing, Mr. John Gully, M.P., I've got one score over you that you don't know about, and never will know about. But it gives me the last laugh.' He chortled, and his mind was warmed by remembered kisses. Buxom she was, and ardent, adding to

the joys of the betrayal. 'Yes, Gully, my lad, it gives me the last laugh all right.'

'You're welcome to it,' Gully replied. 'Look, Crocky, we've been fighting like this long enough. And I don't like it. I don't like to see you looking like this, and I reckon it's up to me to help you. We're both much too sensible to keep on quarrelling.'

'Are we?' Crockford looked at his man suspiciously. 'It doesn't sound right, coming from you.'

'Of course. Don't you see, my lad? We've nothing to quarrel about. Nothing. We've divided the spoils between us.'

Crockford shook his head doubtfully. His breathing was easier now. 'All right. Maybe you're not such a bad sort. Maybe you mean well. But I've hated you for thirty years, John Gully, and it's hard to get out of the habit of a lifetime. I'd be quite lost without the loathing in my heart.'

'You'll feel all the better for losing it. What about shaking hands on it?'

'I must be sicker than I thought I was to agree. All right. There it is.' He extended his hand. For a second or two neither man spoke. 'Mind you, if I were younger I'd still be fighting you.'

'I'm sure you would. And it wouldn't be getting you anywhere. There wouldn't be any sense in it.'

'Oh wouldn't there? Let me tell you, I'd be winning...' He pulled himself up. 'All right. We won't start that again. Tell me, how would you like a little bet, just to celebrate?'

Gully smiled encouragingly. 'I haven't made a book for several years now, Crocky, but I can't refuse to oblige an old friend. You want to back Ratan, I suppose?'

'That's the idea.'

'The legs are laying eight to one. Would you like sixteen thousand to two?'

'Thanks. It's a bet. I'll look forward to winning, but I'll almost be sorry to take your money.' A spasm bubbled up in his chest and he gasped. 'Would you mind taking my arm to the door? I've got one of these spells coming on.'

'Just lean on me. You'll be all right.' Gully started to help him doorwards.

'Something tells me I won't be all right for long. I'm getting near the end of the book, Gully.'

'Nonsense. You only need a rest. Then you'll be all right for another ten years. I'll tell you what. We'll have another bet. I'll lay you three to one that you're fit and well by Christmas twelvemonth.'

Crockford paused at the door. The walk across the room had tired him. 'That's good of you, Gully. I liked hearing you say it. Three to one that I'll be well by Christmas twelvemonth. But I can't take you, my friend. You see, I won't be here to pay you out.'

The Select Committee on the Gaming Laws sat in London in the spring of 1844. It was the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual revolt against the iniquities of the day. It was intended to outlaw the gaming houses. And its star, white and palsied, scarcely able to walk, was William Crockford, the fishmonger from Temple Bar.

News that he had been called to give evidence before the Committee was received in the clubs with a wave of speculation. The old man, it was felt, was going down, but going down fighting. Later news that he had virtually refused to speak, and that the session had been adjourned accordingly, caused a sensation in the coffee houses.

Will-power and a few bets on the Derby, said the gossips. A strange mixture to keep a man going.

Yes, Crockford stood up to the Committee. He appeared in evidence only for a short time, but his personality was plainly behind the entire proceedings. Time and time again witnesses and examiners returned to the one subject, the great club to which he had given his name at the top of St. James's. Crockford's was this, Crockford's was that; Crockford's was a den of iniquity; Crockford's was a place where a gentleman could gamble among

his own peers; Crockford's was a sore on the body of the community; Crockford's was a perfectly legitimate club where a man could indulge his fancy; Crockford's was a curse, its evil influence percolating down through every strata of society; Crockford's was a purely private club in which losses were sustained only by people of wealth. And so the argument went on, witness after witness saying his piece.

Crockford himself received reports of the proceedings not less than twice daily; his sons would read them through to him and they would discuss the various implications. The Honourable Frederick Byng, a humane magistrate, was among the first to speak his mind. Gambling, he maintained, had increased enormously. 'I think the increase in the number of gaming houses is entirely due to Crockford's,' he said quietly.

'Is it not a fact that most of those who played very high at Crockford's are now cleaned out?' a member of the commission asked him.

'Entirely,' replied the magistrate.

'Have you any doubt of the fact that a number of people who were born to very large properties have been very nearly ruined at Crockford's?' came another question.

'No doubt at all,' was the reply.

A number of bookmakers testified about Crockford's horse-racing activities, and other well-known sportsmen gave their versions of what went on in the great club. All the evidence was not hostile to the old fishmonger. The Honourable John Rous, M.P., for instance, went out of his way to say that what went on inside Crockford's did not concern the general public. It did not matter if rich men were ruined, he argued, whereas it did matter if corks and other small fry were ruined in the lesser clubs.

'Would you lay no restraint on the follies of the rich?' he was asked sharply by an examiner.

'No,' he replied blandly. 'Indeed, I think the club does good rather than evil,' he added.

Crockford had the passage read to him and purred. He was more apprehensive about the evidence of a minor bookmaker named Watts, who alleged that Crockford had threatened him with legal action to recover money he had lost to him and for penalties. These actions had caused a sensation in sporting circles only the previous year. They had been started by an enterprising lawyer named Russell, who suddenly filed actions against all sorts of people, including the great Lord George Bentinck, to recover gambling money and claim compensation. Russell, in fact, was defeated, a solid British jury throwing his test case out of court — but not before John Gully, among others, had had some anxious moments in the witness box.

So now Crockford was revealed as the man behind Russell, the man who stooped to anything for a win, and would be prepared to threaten legal action to recover a loss. Apparently, there was no villainy too black for him. Crockford himself read the evidence and smiled approvingly. For once he was guiltless. He had long since lost interest in betting with people like Watts and the fellow was merely sunning himself in the notoriety of a greater bookmaker. A few years ago and he would have had the fellow beaten up. Today it 'wasn't worth while.

So, one way and other, the committee on gambling became very much a committee on William Crockford. The old man's personality was behind it all. When they asked questions, it was about his activities that they most frequently asked them. Everything about him came to light, piece by piece; his origin, his achievements; his club, his fortune, his horses. If villainy was reported, it was alleged that he was at the back of it. Day by day, as the commission examined witness after witness, and as they slowly built up a detailed picture of a gaming world which was steeped in chicanery, they came back to the same old man.

But when he was sitting in front of them he was the most docile, forgetful, fussy old fellow in the world. He appeared to be willing to help; it was his infirmity that made him forget everything that would be of the slightest value. About Crockford's

itself he apparently knew nothing, having retired long ago. His past betting transactions were so many muddles in his mind; he forgot figures; he contradicted himself solely because his mind was failing. He was willing, but unable to help.

His solicitor and his sons were alike delighted. It was a fine performance. The old man was at his best, encouraging senility. They asked and asked, but they got precisely no change out of him.

The ordeal was not a long one, and truth to tell it did not worry him as it would have done years earlier. He knew he was fighting a losing battle, but he was not fighting it for himself as much as for the gamblers of the morrow. His own innings was as good as over. They had revealed things about him which could have meant deportation, but he did not mind. He was not frightened of any further proceedings. He was safe, surrounded by vast wealth, by the best legal brains that money could buy; the most they would do would be to prevent the rise of another Crockford; the present one, he sensed, would die in peace, the first and last of a dynasty.

But before he died he had to win the Derby on Ratan. It would be his greatest coup; he had planned it with care, spreading his money round the ring with all his old skill. The market had absorbed a fortune. It was as well that there were other fancied horses or by now it would be at odds on.

Day by day now he was driven to Tattersalls to lay more money on the horse. The prices went up and down, in and out. Ratan hardened to seven's, and at one time to sixes. Then money came with a rush for Running Rein, while there was a lot of support for Orlando. From the first it was obvious that the market had no time for any but these three.

Crockford, who had grown into a legend in his own lifetime, came out in the spring sunshine. Young gamblers to whom he was merely a name now saw him for the first time, and felt the weight of his vast wealth. They would look at him with curiosity, this man who was so obviously spent, this sagging giant from the past, this man who clung on to life determined to

realise an old ambition. So day by day he appeared at Tattersall's, placing a hundred here, a fifty there; sometimes finding a veteran of his own generation and negotiating a really big bet. Up and down, up and down, went the odds.

As Derby day approached the odds against Ratan shortened until it looked as though the horse would start at no more than three to one. It had many influential followers, none more so than Lord George Bentinck, who had first backed it during the winter, and who had increased his commitments month by month ever since.

All was well; the favourite was trained by Joe Rogers and was to be ridden by his son Sam, in whom the impeccable Lord George had every confidence.

The first sign that it might not be easy came with a late rush of money for Ugly Buck, which was trained by the Days, and whose form was therefore known to the formidable Danesbury clique which was headed by Gully. So, once again, it seemed as though Crockford and his old enemy were to be in opposite camps.

Lord George, who betted through Harry Hill, who was himself marked as a Danesbury man, but who was much too careful to fall foul of the reformist peer, first noticed that there was will-ing Danesbury money against Ratan, and started to get anxious. Other signs, too, made the knowledgeable Lord George distend his nostrils to the breeze of suspicion. He smelt the wrong sort of conspiracy.

Crockford received news that all might now not be well from his Lordship, and sent his son John to Epsom at the gallop. The son was in his late thirties, quick-witted, intelligent, with more than a touch of his father's ruthlessness. There was a short interview during which Sam Rogers admitted that he had been offered money by two north country bookmakers if he would only make Ratan safe. Lord George left London at speed when he heard the news and demanded the jockey's betting book.

This he proceeded to call over in public on the Monday before the race, choosing the steps of the Spread Eagle Hotel at Epsom as his vantage point. He was watched by a gathering of the merely curious and the vitally interested. Leaders of the gambling set admitted to the bets as their names were called. Gully was the first and he agreed that he had laid Rogers 350 to 25 guineas against the horse. He also admitted that Rogers had a bet on Ugly Buck with him.

His Lordship completed the investigation, evidently none the wiser.

The racing fraternity, however, had drawn certain deductions, and Ugly Buck came with a rush to displace Ratan from favouritism.

However, on the night before the race the great Lord George came personally to reassure Crockford. The old man was sitting up in a chair, facing his favourite window. It was early June and warm and the scent of the first roses came in from the garden. But Crockford appeared to have no eyes for them. He stared in front of him without speaking; his hands were folded, and seemed almost transparent; his breath came quickly and was light; he hardly moved, and his legs were wrapped in a shawl.

'Don't worry, Crockford,' Lord George said quietly. 'I've seen Sam Rogers and I can assure you he won't do anything but ride straight. I've put the fear of God into his soul. I've seen his book and he knows I'm not satisfied. He knows that if he makes a false move I'll have him warned off Newmarket Heath. He'll ride tomorrow with his whole future depending on it. He knows that. He's quite safe.'

'I was thinking of changing the jockey,' Crockford said quietly.

'No need to do that.' Lord George was nothing if not self-confident. 'There's no better rider than the man who dare not be straight. You'll win tomorrow on Ratan all right.'

The old eyes sparkled and one of the hands moved. 'Yes, we'll win, my Lord.'

'Good-bye, Crocky. I'm turning in early. I'm going back to

Epsom at dawn.' The racing reformer looked at his man and hesitated. On an impulse he put his hand out. 'Good luck.' They shook hands, the lord of the modern racing world, and the sharper from the last generation. His Lordship took his leave, a little puzzled at his own feelings. Funny; the fellow had death on his face. He might not last the week out. Here he was, limping home exhausted at the end of a long distance, a man who had been guilty of every villainy known on the turf. The most outrageous gambler of them all, he had avoided deportation, or even the gallows, only by thinking one move faster than the next man. His record was a disgrace to the history of racing. And yet you couldn't help but like him. He had been coarse, unscrupulous, bestial and prodigal; yet he had an air about him. And now he was burned out; his old eyes saw little, his hearing was impaired; the life blood was draining back into his heart, so that his hands were numbed and white. The long race was nearly over; the dying man was alone; even his memories were fuddled. Strange, in his way he had made a bit of history.

His Lordship walked vigorously up St. James's, past Crockford's Club. It was the end of an epoch. The place was nearly empty.

In Epsom the jockey Sam Rogers was bolted up for the night in the same stable with his mount Ratan. Two lads kept guard outside.

At his large estate near Winchester, John Gully turned in early; he had to be on the road for Epsom by dawn next day. The great house was respectfully silent. The master slept.

In London Lord George Bentinck slept the sound sleep of the very virtuous, his mind satisfied that he had done everything which could be done to ensure that Ratan won on the morrow.

At Crockford's Club the croupier Page rattled the dice and watched the faces of the gamblers. It was a thin table and the stakes were not what they had been in the golden days. It was as though the aristocracy of England, with no more ready cash to

spare for the game of hazard, was giving up gaming in keeping with the spirit of the modern times.

In Carlton House Terrace Crockford himself sat up in bed. He was propped by many pillows, for he had had a sharp attack just before midnight and the doctor had been called. His pulse was left very fast and weak and there was little life in him. But he could see his wife, moving in and out of the shadows around the bedside; he could see the night candle, waving in the light air from the open window; he could see the moonlight pale in the June night. He sat propped up there motionless, his mind on a coming triumph at a distant Epsom.

An hour or two later, while the June sky was pink and pearl after the early summer sunrise, the jockey Rogers still slept as soundly as the crawling horse flies would allow him.

Up the road from Winchester went the great John Gully, in a handsome canter, his horses arranged at strategic inns along the road to Epsom. A fine figure of a squire, big and red-faced, a handsome, weather-beaten man of the world, warm in his generosity, not quite so warm in his attacks on the betting ring.

From London George Bentinck, fastidious in everything he did, converged on Epsom Downs at a fair trot.

At Crockford's Club the servants slept fitfully below stairs.

At Carlton House Terrace a woman moved. It was Sarah. Like her husband, she was old now, but she had worn the better. Her hair was white and advancing years were shrivelling her, so that she seemed tinier than she had been in the old days. But she still had plenty of fuss and energy, and normally she bustled cheerfully about the business of running her various houses. At heart she remained what she should always have been in her own mind — the respectable wife of a respectable tradesman. Modern psychologists would have explained quite simply how it was that she, married to a notorious gamester, was able completely to ignore his dicing except during crisis, and regard him instead as a sort of adventurous businessman.

This morning she retreated from his room and hurried along the passage to her son John. Her expression was sad but purposeful. She could see that she was nearly widowed.

'John, wake up!' she said urgently, pulling at his arm. He woke slowly and in a blur. 'What's the matter, mother?'

'It's Father. He's much worse. He can hardly speak. And when I mentioned the doctor he didn't even curse him.'

'That's not like him, I must say.'

'He says he wants you to go up to him, boy. He wants to get into his best clothes and be taken downstairs, to sit in the Terrace window and wait for the Derby result.'

'Get up! That's absolutely mad!'

She waved his objections aside. 'It isn't. Don't you understand, boy? It isn't mad, John. It's your Father all over. Don't you follow me? He's going.' Her voice broke; the odd partnership was nearly ended. 'He's going fast. You can see it in his face. And he knows it, just as well as I do.'

'But —'

'Don't you understand, John? It's that brain of his, working faster than the next man, just as it used to do. He always thought one move faster than any of us, did your Father. He can hardly talk, John, but he explained it to me, bit by bit. If he dies now and the horse wins, the bets may be void. They can do that, John. So he's coming down to show himself, so that people walking by can see him through the gate. Just like they've been seeing him all these sick months.' She sobbed deeply, scarcely noticing the big man who had grown out of her first baby. 'He's going to sit there, John, with his legs in the grave already — sit there and smile at them until the pigeon comes with the news that he's got his last ambition.'

She fell across the bed, weeping bitterly.

In a room along the passage an old man sat propped up in his pillows. He was motionless, as though conserving his energy. His nearly sightless eyes scarcely blinked and his chest hardly moved, so light was his breathing. Slowly, he was aware of a

noise in his own throat and gradually he focused his faculties and studied it, interested, as detachedly as a man might listen to distant music.

It was a strange noise, and it reminded him of the sound of the dice box.

It was a hot afternoon and the elegant windows of Carlton House Terrace were mostly screened by sun blinds. The strong sunshine seemed to have slowed down the whole life of London; there was a siesta air about the centre of the town; the crowds on the pavements seemed to walk more slowly than usual, tending to herd together in the shadows. It was a town of sharp contrasts, of deep shadowing and high sunlight, a town of flowers, and blinds, and colours and houseflies. A smell came off the dung in the streets and the carriages moved lazily.

William Crockford, alone in this June warmth, was a cold man, a rug over his knees and a cushion behind his back. There was a shawl over his shoulders and a smoking cap on his head. The window overlooking the Terrace was firmly closed. But Crockford was making his effort; he was under pressure, nearing the post; his brain was working coolly. He felt much better than he had done that morning and he had will-power enough to keep on feeling better for an hour or two yet.

'There's the old crossing sweeper, touching his hat. It must be a month since I last saw him.' He was smiling, and his voice was soft but steady.

'It's a fortnight, Dad. You've only been upstairs for two weeks.'

He nodded. Things came in and out into his consciousness like people struggling to the light of an inn from the dark. Now he could see his boy John. And here was Sarah, reedy little thing now, but fussy as ever.

'Is Smith in the pigeon loft?' he asked.

'Everything's arranged, Dad. There's nothing for you to worry about. We're getting three messages; one for the betting, one for the Off, and then the result.'

'Fine.' He nodded. 'Pity I can't be there to see us win. I was a fool to let that doctor talk me out of it.'

'You're better off here, Father,' said his wife sharply.

'I wonder.' His voice, no louder than a whisper, was clear and his words had sharp edges. 'It would have done me more good to see Ratan come home. What's the time?'

'It's just on three o'clock, Father. The first bird's just come in.' There was a knock on the door. 'That'll be Smith.' He took the paper pellet from the servant. 'Yes, it's the message.'

Crockford raised his hand impatiently. 'Come along, boy. Hurry.. What does it say?'

'It says . . . it's about the betting.'

'It wouldn't be about the weather. Read it out.'

'It says that Running Rein is hot favourite. Ugly Buck is next, and Ratan is going out in the betting.'

Crockford raised his head. The old warrior sensed the trouble in the news. 'So they're knocking Ratan, are they? Well, it needn't mean anything. It's still the best horse. It'll only make our win all the finer. Keep your eye on the sky, John, and watch for the next bird. They must be off by now.'

The wait seemed interminable. The sick man sat there, bolt upright, seeing little, staring straight ahead of him, his hands lifeless. A fly crawled on his face but had flown off long before he could raise his fist. The son John prowled the room impatiently, his mind confused. The woman, who was nearly widowed sat silently by her husband, her fingers sewing mechanically.

'If only I had my legs again,' he was saying, in a voice so soft it was hard to hear. 'If only I could be down there, seeing what's happening, ruling the market, just like I used to. Betting on Running Rein! They don't know a good thing when they see it. I'd have doubled every bet I had by now.'

'Don't get excited, William now, don't get excited.' She put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

'How can I help getting excited? I want to be excited. Aren't I winning the Derby, Sarah? What's wrong with that for a fish-

monger, eh? Aren't I doing what I always said I would do — what even Gully can't manage?' The temperature had changed suddenly, it seemed, and his forehead was slimy with sweat. The voice was stronger and there was urgency in it. 'They're betting on Running Rein, aren't they? There must be a reason for it. I know what racing is. I ought to. I've fixed more results than most people, haven't I? Am I going to have my own Derby fixed against me?'

'Of course not, my dear, of course not. Everything will be all right.' She wiped his forehead; his lips were black with fever now. Tears of fear and uncontrolled self-pity fell from his eyes.

John tried to reassure him. 'It's all right, Father. We haven't lost yet.'

The sobs were very real and the old man shook with a violent shivering fit. 'We haven't lost? We mustn't lose. It isn't the money. It's the honour. There hasn't been so much honour in old Crocky's life, but they won't cheat me out of this one, will they?'

'You must be quiet, Father,' his wife said. 'You're upsetting yourself and trembling all over. I'll go and get you a medicine draught.'

'Don't be a fool, girl, I don't want medicine. I want wine. Bring out some Madeira.'

'Wine?'

'Wine I said.' The voice had peeled back the years and now in death was strong again. 'Bring out the Madeira. It was always my favourite. That's how I've wanted it to be, Sarah. Madeira and a Derby winner. Well, go on. What are you waiting for? Aren't the glasses on the side table?'

'As you wish, Father.'

John returned from the window. 'There's a bird just in, Father. That'll be the Off.'

'The Off, John. Hurry up and see what the news is.'

The son disappeared while the mother fussed with the glasses. The old man took the goblet and held it in a hand which trembled. 'Pour the wine, my dear. Pour the wine. Let's toast victory.'

He gulped. 'Ah. That's better. Much better. Give me Madeira instead of this filth the doctors want to stuff me with.' He paused abruptly. Although his sight was going his hearing was acute; he heard the door close behind his returning son. He sensed what was coming. 'Well, John? Well? Come on, boy, what's happened?' His voice rose in a shrill crescendo of fear. 'Out with it.'

'Ratan's been left at the post.'

The clock ticked; the old man was breathing fast and heavily, like a tired fighter. The goblet was slopping over his hands and down on to his legs, the wine puddling at his feet as though he were wetting himself. When he spoke his voice came in low gasps, as though the sudden fire that had flickered up in the breeze had been damped down again.

'Ratan . . . left at the post . . . So they've done it on old Crocky, have they?' The tears fell unchecked. 'They changed the dice, right at the end of the game.' Once more the flame stirred and flickered; once more a mockery of the old power came back into the voice. 'More wine, Sarah. More wine! Let's drink to them.'

She was sobbing audibly. Somehow she had never expected it to be like this. 'Don't, Father. Don't.'

'What do you expect me to do? Curse them? Why should I? They've only done what has been done so often. Funny, isn't it? I made up my mind to do one thing. And I've been nobbled. Nobbled. Just like any of the races I've fixed. Fill my glass, John. Here's to Gully. He didn't do it. I'm sure of that. Funny. After all the years of fighting him he's now the only one of them I'd trust. Here's to the whole crowd —'

'Wait a minute, Father. The last bird has just come in.'

'It's the result. Hurry up and get it. What's the matter with you, John? Why don't you hurry? Are you frightened of losing?' There was a knock on the door, and the old man waited, listening to the whispered sounds, his hearing the one remaining sense by which he clung on to life.

'Come on, boy,' he said impatiently. 'Come on. I can't wait

to hear my own defeat. Running Rein, of course. Out with it? What did it win by?"

John opened the pellet. 'Running Rein won, Father. By three lengths. Orlando was second. Ratan was eighth.'

'Ratan was eighth.' The goblet poised drunkenly in a hand that had no feeling, and the wine slopped down again, good earthy Madeira wine that he had loved for so many years.

'They must have cheated, Father,' John was saying urgently. 'They must have cheated! It couldn't have been a fair result. There'll be an inquiry. I'll bet you anything you like.' - 2

Outside the sun was high and hot; it was June; it was England; it was flowers and warmth and colour; outside, it was life, stirring warmly. As the breath fades away until it is the merest blur on a waiting mirror, so the voice died down until it trailed off from a whisper.

'You say you'd bet me anything you like, John? I wouldn't, boy. You see, my son, I shan't be here to pay you out.'

The head slumped forward. The glass fell heavily into the wine puddle. It did not break, but rolled round stupidly on the carpet.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

William Crockford was born in 1775 over a bulkshop at Temple Bar, where his mother sold fish. He died in Carlton House Terrace in 1844. In the years between, in the words of Gronow, he 'won the whole of the ready money of the then existing generation'. He started with nothing but his wits; he ended up leaving more than £200,000 in personal property, together with real estate estimated at about £150,000. He made of gambling an art and of bookmaking an exact science. He did more than any other man to create a new aristocracy of successful gamblers, but his imitators, who were many, were mainly transients; they rose, they fell; they did not succeed in dying in Carlton House Terrace.

In his heyday Crockford was known to every man of position in the kingdom; the nobility and the sportsmen knew him on the racecourse; the statesmen knew him at his Club. He was feared, he was lampooned; perversely, he was admired. While one section of the public damned him as an anti-social menace, another grinned sporting approval of his triumphs, revelling in the prospect of a sharper fleecing the young men of the clubs.

Throughout all this Crockford's personal relationship with his victims and customers was rather like that, perhaps, of a modern head waiter at some restaurant of distinction. He was known, that is, as a personality. He would be mentioned in the gossip of the day; he would figure in the journals and the diaries. He was part of the life of Newmarket and London, accorded a successful place, like a leading jockey or a winning prizefighter. The gentry, in short, knew him to bet with or plunge against. They were happy to enter his Club; it never occurred to them to invite him home.

Crockford, inevitably, left little but the gossip and the newspaper and magazine references behind him. A man of learning

presents an easy target for the biographer; his papers are full of thought; his character can be read like a relief map; his position in society is marked by cheque book and club subscription; usually, when he dies, he leaves behind him, through the journals of his equals, a hundred clues which the enthusiast can chase a century later. Not so with Crockford, who belonged to the shadow world where a man preferred to deal in ready money, where a punter committed little to paper, even if he had the gift of signing his own name. The writer can be traced through his writing; his doings are recorded, usually, in a thousand letters or notes. The thoughts of a Crockford seldom find their way on to paper, and when they do few people are expected to preserve a betting slip for posterity.

Anyone attracted to Crockford, then, is unlikely to find much direct evidence of the man himself more than one hundred years after his death. There are such things as the local rate books: dully official; they do little but confirm the already known. A gambler leaves no personal record. But Crockford, with his mixture of spectacular courage and impudence, was a figure of importance. He preferred to pick the most exalted pockets. Their owners rewarded him with fury or grudging tribute, recorded in the ephemeral literature of the day. So though we may know nothing of Crockford, as told by Crockford, we know a great deal about him from the jottings of his contemporaries.

He was a man who could only have happened in the England of the early nineteenth century; he was a product of an industrial revolution whose name he had not heard; he was anti-social, yet it was possible for the truculent John Rous, giving evidence before the Select Committee on Gambling of 1844, to assert that Crockford's Club did good rather than evil, arguing that it was a place for the levelling up of disproportionate fortunes. In all this 'Crocky' himself, bad-tempered and grubby, was a triumph of the paradoxical and the unexpected, as sudden and dramatic as the flash of scarlet fungus in the leaf drifts of early winter. He may have been damnable; he was at least unique.

It was soon apparent to the present writer, when starting a research into the life of Crockford, that anything in the nature of an exact biography was made impossible by the very nature of the subject. There were many legends but few facts. The result, therefore, was this life in fictionalised form, in which most of the accepted Crockford stories have been incorporated. It is reasonable to believe, for instance, that the man started his extraordinary career as a result of a big win at cribbage over a King-street butcher. This oddity is vouched for by the long note published in Bentley's *Miscellany* after his death, and is duly incorporated in this story. The lifelong feud with Gully, which had been built up to form the main dramatic motivation, is certain as a fact, less certain as a dominating one.

I have altered the most widely circulated of all the Crockford legends — the fancy story that he was propped up in a window seat after his death, so that passers-by would see him and imagine him still to be alive, thus enabling his friends to collect on some betting coup which would have been cancelled by his death before the race. This grotesque yarn has been printed endlessly but does not stand investigation. In its way it is a tribute to the man; it is the sort of scene which Crockford would have been capable of plotting and a death gesture of which he might well have approved.

The man was like that; lurid and spectacular, contemptuous of victim. It was a mark of his strength that he became a legend in his own lifetime.

References to Crockford can easily be found in a great many journals and diaries of the first fifty years of the nineteenth century; newspaper and broadsheet mentions of him were legion. He was mocked at in bad verse, libelled — if that be possible — in lampoon; and his name appeared among the gentry in the *Racing Calendar*. Only a fraction of the many sources can be mentioned here. Descriptions of his Club alone are numerous; they range from a detailed report in Disraeli's novel, *Sybil*, to a casual reference in a line or two by almost every social historian and

diarist of the period. To chase the Crockford references from source to source is to hunt the field of sporting and social history of three generations. Anyone so interested will find some of these references detailed and exciting, opening like doors on to a raucous bedlam of betting ring and prizefight. Others are fragmentary; none is surely dull.

The most important biography of Crockford was published in *Bentley's Miscellany* in the year after his death (volume 17). An article in two instalments, 'Crockford and 'Crockford's', by Perditus, it is longer, less hysterical, and seemingly more objective than any similar work published by a contemporary.

References to and detailed descriptions of, Crockford's Club, which he opened in 1828, and whose building at the top of St. James's-street is now the club house of the Devonshire, are many. Perhaps the most important is in Timb's *Club Life in London*, vol. 1, published in 1866. A description of life at the Club during its fashionable period appears in the second volume of the *Reminiscences and Recollections of Captain Gronow*, a compilation of most fascinating jottings by a professional soldier who was a very expert observer. (Gronow is a strangely neglected social diarist who surely deserves much more appreciation than he gets.)

These books once read, the hunt for Crockford ephemera can range over papers and reports of 100 years. There is a charming book on *John Gully* by Bernard Darwin (1935) which brilliantly rebuilds 'the atmosphere' of the period; there is Walford's *Old and New London*, with a drawing of Crockford's bulk shop birth-place at Temple Bar and a description of the Club; there is quite a bit of material in *Amusements of Old London*, by William B. Boulton (1901), while S. Ashton's *The History of Gambling in England* (1898) puts Crockford into perspective among the major gaming developments of modern times.

There are a number of references to Crockford's in such an unexpected place as *The Life of Theodore Hook*, by H. Dalton Barham. It is a bad book, like so many mid-century biographies,

its moralising padding out between the sparse and hesitant facts. But it is singular in that the reverend author refers to Crockford's, the Carlton and the Athenaeum in one sentence, as though they were on an equal social footing, as, indeed, they well were.

Gronow provides more material in his *Celebrities of London and Paris*, 3rd series, and minor references to the gambler appear in Raikes diary and the Croker papers.

Contemporary articles and entries attacking gambling, with veiled or open tilts at Crockford, seem infinite. The curious can find a fair specimen in an article, 'The Anatomy of Gaming', by Nimrod, in *Fraser's Magazine* of May, 1838, in which the writer admitted that you might as well talk of shutting Westminster Abbey as of closing down Crockford's. In August, 1833, the same journal had examined 'The Hells of London', in article form, and saw fit to quote *Crockford House, a rhapsody in Two Cantos*, published anonymously but generally believed to be the work of the minor poet Henry Luttrell. Luttrell's *Crockford's, or Life in the West* (1828) is one of the chief contemporary sources on the main life. This book has also been attributed to the now forgotten Deale.

Crockford's death was appropriately reported in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of July, 1844. It said:

May 24. In Carlton House Terr., aged 69, William Crockford, Esq. Administration with his will annexed (no executor being named therein) has been granted to Mrs. A. F. Crockford, his widow. The will is dated as late as last month, and gives the whole of his property to his wife in nearly the following words: — 'I give and bequeath the whole of my property of whatsoever description unto my dear wife and her heirs, relying on her doing what is right.' The personal property alone is sworn under the sum of 200,000*l.* and it is rumoured that his real estate is worth 150,000*l.* more. He formerly kept the fishmonger's shop adjoining Temple Bar and, by a series of suc-

cessful speculations on the 'Turf', was enabled to purchase the house in St. James's Street, afterwards terribly famous as 'Crockford's': and it is said that there the deceased amassed the bulk of his vast fortune.

'Terribly famous' is perhaps fair.

Sporting journalism provides much material on the man, some of it merely the registered names of forgotten and unsuccessful racehorses. In addition to the dry facts of the *Racing Calendar*, there are references to Crockford in *Kings of the Turf*, by Thormant; there is a little in John Kent's *Racing Life of Lord George Bentinck*, and some useful background to the notorious Mameluke conspiracy in Fletcher's *History of the St. Leger Stakes* (1902). Urban Sylvanus, in *The Bye-Ways and Downs of England*, describes Crockford's house at Newmarket and the man himself.

The Report and Evidence of the Select Committee on Gaming, 1844, gives an extraordinary account of a remarkable and now forgotten world, and although Crockford appeared reluctantly and sketchily in the evidence, his record dominated the proceedings more than that of anyone else.

There are many references to the man in local Newmarket histories, of which perhaps the most interesting is *Newmarket, its Sport and Personalities*, by Frank Siltzer (Cassell: 1923). Crockford's Road, Newmarket, exists to this day and must be known to all racegoers as they leave the railway station. Crockford's Farm is still marked outside the town in survey maps.

The actual clubhouse to which Crockford gave his name, built by Benjamin Dean Wyatt, is admirably described in *The Devonshire Club and Crockford's*, a small book by H. T. Waddy (Socleigh Nash: 1919). It includes a fair sketch of Crockford's career and reproduces some of the many sporting prints, in which he played hero or villain according to taste. *Memories of St. James's Street*, by E. B. Chancellor (Grant Richards: 1922) gives an interesting history of the street with appropriate reference to one of its most singular characters. James Gallatin makes occasional —

and in one case a glaringly inaccurate — reference to the club in his diary *A Great Peacemaker*, which covers the period of 1813 to 1827.

The general reader interested in the prize fights of Crockford's boyhood can find their standard descriptions in Pearce Egan's *Boxiana*, published in four volumes from 1818 to 1824. It is from these vivid if badly written books that scores of writers have turned for their source information on the days of the Game Chicken. Other books which contain Crockfordiana include *Admiral Rous and the English Turf*, by T. H. Bird (Putnam: 1939), *Baily's Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* (Nov., 1888), *Baily's Magazine* for 1891, *Fraser's Magazine*, vol. 16. *Rouge Et Noir*, by Charles Perseus, a book attributed to Dunne and published in 1823, contains the original mention of the incident of the loaded dice and the then Duke of Norfolk which is incorporated in this book.

Even *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Slingsby Duncambe, M.P.*, edited by his son (London: 1868) contain details of the high play at Crockford's club, and such a book is but one of many. Pierce Egan's extravagant *Life in London* (1824) contains one of the few reports of the lawsuit *Orme v. Crockford* in which occurred the witticism that an important witness had been instructed to disappear for the defendant. Bell's *Life in London* (1824) contains a similar account.

Other works of value in the hunt are A. D. R. Cochran's *In the Days of the Dandies* (London: 1890) and *History of the British Turf*, by J. C. Whyte (1840). There are many such; an article on Crockford's even appeared in *Chambers's Journal* more than 50 years after his death. He was a man who attracted a hundred paragraphists, but never a biographer.

While it is difficult to find precise information about a gambler who left no papers behind him, it is even more difficult to find out anything about his wife. I could trace no records of Mrs. A. F. Crockford, as the *Gentleman's Magazine* styled her, and the Sarah Crockford of this story is therefore entirely fictional. The statement that she produced a family of fourteen children is

taken from one of Crockford's obituaries. Fictional, too, is the character of Colonel the Honourable Charles Edward Sebastian Foster, who is based on one of the sporting squires of his day, and fictional, also, are the names and characters of Crockford's various women, whether titled or inn-keeper, as sketched in the story. History, not unnaturally, did not go out of its way to say whether they even existed. For the rest, people mentioned in the tale are almost always taken from the sporting records of the day, and are placed as far as possible in their correct historical perspective. Crockford's croupiers, for example, are given their correct names; the colourfully named but now forgotten prize-fighters mentioned in the earlier pages were all men whose records are a matter of simple sporting lore.

Of the story itself, it may be said that there is no historical justification for assuming that Crockford started his fantastic career by recognising the greatness of Tom Johnson, and by passing him on to the ageing Broughton. What is certain is that he started in some such way, as a hanger-on, as a small but lucky gambler; a youth with sufficient money to make a big killing in a cribbage challenge match against a King-street grocer. Indeed, that cribbage match, vouched for by *Bentley's Miscellany*, is really the first fact to be picked from the bran tub. All we know, before that game, is contained in a baptismal certificate, taken from the records of St. Clement Danes church in the Strand. The hells which followed the cribbage match were real enough, as their victims knew to their cost. There were many hells, and many rumours. They were to continue, with varying degrees of success, for the rest of Crockford's life. It appears to be a fact that the man who rocked the rich was himself relieved of a substantial part of his winnings; his decision to subsidise a gold-mining venture near Glasgow is vouched for by one of his contemporary obituaries, although I failed to find any record of it when hunting a century later.

Crockford's name occurs regularly in the shadier reaches of racing history. He was never directly identified with a fraud,

but the hints and innuendos were thinly disguised. The notorious Mameluke fiasco, was summed up simply by Mr Bernard Darwin, writing in the 1930's. 'The general belief,' he wrote, 'was that Old Crocky had got at the starter, who was afterwards relieved of his duties, but that was small comfort . . .'

Getting at the starter, of course, was no novelty in those days. That Crockford would not have hesitated to avail himself of such advantages is a foregone conclusion, judging by the sporting writers.

But in his death he was cheated of his final triumph. For although there is no truth in the legend that his body was propped up and exhibited to satisfy some racing coup, it is true that his Ratan was beaten in the most notorious Derby on record. After Running Rein's victory it transpired that the winning horse was not Running Rein at all; but a four year old which had been dishonestly substituted. It was the greatest scandal of them all, but Crocky was not there to hear about it.

